An Affair of My Life with the Heroes and Villains (Just See What You've Done)

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An Affair of My Life with the Heroes and Villains (Just See What You've Done)

by PocketMouse18

Summary

In a world where crime pays and heroism is just another 9-to-5, professional villain Melinda May thinks she's seen it all. But when she learns some surprising information about her nemesis, Quake, it sets in motion a chain of events that even Melinda couldn't see coming.

Notes

This story was originally inspired by the tumblr post by "writing-prompt-s" that says: "You'd known, intellectually, that your heroic nemesis was a teenager, but it didn't really sink in until the day their school called because your number was the only one on their emergency contact list." It was also loosely inspired by the story written by tumblr user "bixbythemartian" in response to the prompt, particularly the first chapter. I think I've made enough changes and taken a different enough direction with it that this story is wholly its own, but I want to make sure I credit my sources of inspiration!

Title is taken from the song "Heroes and Villains" by the Beach Boys.

General TWs for the whole fic include canon-typical violence (think s3-4, mostly, and general superhero fights) and swearing. I'll try to mention chapter-specific warnings as they come, but please let me know if I miss something!

Chapter 1: An Unexpected Call

Chapter Notes

TW for hospital setting, broken bone

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I know I'm not breaking any new ground here, but I feel like it's important to start this account by clarifying that there's a difference between a person being a villain and a person being a bad person. A villain, more than anything, is a job. As much as people like to pretend otherwise, villainy, like heroism, is a profession. You punch in, you clock out, you cash your sponsors' or employers' checks, you decide how much of a boundary you build between your personal life and your public persona. Am I a villain? I think anybody you asked would say yes. Am I a bad person? That gets more complicated, and goes back a lot farther than the first time I put on the mask of Maelstromeda."

Melinda May's next sentence was interrupted by the sharp ringing of the phone. So much for getting a good start on her project this afternoon.

Heaving a sigh, she clicked off the tape recorder and pulled herself out of her chair with a faint groan. Her knee was acting up again. One of the many hazards of continuing her line of work into middle age.

She crossed stiffly to the other side of the room, but was surprised to find that her work line was dark and silent. Odd. She listened again as the phone continued ringing and realized, probably more slowly than she should have, that it was her personal phone – well, one of them – that was making the all the racket. Odder still.

"Hello?" She knew better than to say anything more than that when answering an entirely unexpected call.

"Hi, this is Dr. Greene from the Metro General ER. Is this June Johnson speaking?"

Melinda didn't speak immediately. She was quickly rifling through as many possible reasons why someone from the city hospital would be calling for one of her scarcely-used aliases. Was this a trap? Had someone figured out one of her secret identities? How much of her life might be compromised?

“Ms. Johnson?”

“I’m sorry, yes, I’m here.” The only way to figure out how much her enemies might know was to keep them talking.

“We’re calling about your daughter.”

“My… daughter?”

Melinda didn’t have a daughter. At least, not as far as she knew.

“Yes, Daisy was brought in not long ago. She had an accident and sustained some injuries. We’re treating her now, and she should be fine, but her intake paperwork has you listed as her emergency contact, and we wanted to let you know.”

“My daughter,” Melinda repeated numbly. “My daughter Daisy is in the hospital?” *What was this doctor talking about?*

“Again, I want to assure you that she’s being taken care of and is not in any sort of critical condition—”

“Who gave you this number?” she demanded, her old familiar defensiveness taking over on instinct. “What do you want from me?”

“Your number is listed as the emergency contact. We want you to come pick up your daughter from the hospital and sign her discharge paperwork. She’s a minor, she can’t leave without adult consent.” Now it was the doctor who sounded confused and defensive. “Look, Ms. Johnson, if there’s someone else we should call—”

“No,” Melinda said sharply. “No, I’ll be right there.”

She hung up before the doctor had a chance to say anything more, and before anyone trying to trace the call would have time to narrow the signal. She began to pace the length of her office, massaging her knee absentmindedly as she tried to figure out what was going on.

Someone had access to one of her personal lines – one connected to one of her aliases. Granted, June Johnson was one of her more mundane identities, one she used for some real estate, a few investment accounts… Above-board stuff, typically. But still, for someone to use the number for a hospital call and not a financial check-in… And apparently an injured child was involved? Unless it was all a set-up, and the child was a falsehood designed to lure her into a public place.

She thought through the list of opponents she'd gone toe-to-toe with recently. The Specter Society were white-collar, not likely to engage in physical cat-and-mouse tactics. The Watchdogs had been quiet for some time, so it was possible this was their reappearance. And Quake… no, inventing a hurt child just to draw her out into the open was certainly not Quake's style.

Despite the obvious warning signs, Melinda's curiosity began to get the better of her, and if she was being honest, the possibility that there was actually a child in need of help was beginning to weigh on her, too. Maybe there was some sort of mix-up at the hospital and her information got confused for another June Johnson. It wasn't that uncommon of a name, after all.

Her mind made up, Melinda headed for the closet and began to dress, donning enough of a disguise that she should be able to enter the hospital undetected and get to the bottom of this mystery once and for all.

She was on high alert as she walked into the emergency room entrance at Metro General. Old habits had her checking every corner, window, and roofline as she slipped into bustling building and made her way to the front desk.

"How can I help you?" asked the receptionist cheerfully.

"Um, yes, I'm June Johnson. I got a call about twenty minutes ago about my daughter, Daisy?"

The receptionist nodded along as Melinda spoke and began typing something into her computer. "Mm-hm, yep, I've got her pulled up here. Do you have ID?"

With an ease only perfected by years of deception and undercover work, Melinda produced her fake driver's license, complete with all of June Johnson's credentials.

"Great. Let me just print off this visitor's badge for you and then you can head on back. She's in exam room 3 behind those big double doors to your right."

Melinda thanked the woman – she may be a villain, but she wasn't *rude* – and followed her directions, still raking her gaze across the room in search of anything suspicious, trying to feel if anyone in the room was harboring bad intentions. Nothing stood out besides waves

of anxiety rippling off most of the people in the waiting room. She didn't feel especially comforted by that fact, and her confusion continued to grow.

When she opened the door to exam room three a few moments later, what she saw only added to her bewilderment. A girl in dark makeup and a knit cap sat hunched on the exam bed, her left arm encased in a thick cast from knuckles to forearm. A girl that, despite Melinda never having seen her face before, Melinda instantly knew. Maybe it was the way she carried herself, or the color of her hair that tumbled out from underneath the beanie – dark brown waves with a few purple streaks here and there. Possibly it was her eyes. Her usual mask and cowl hid her identity well, but even those garments couldn't obscure the dark, fierce eyes that Melinda had stared into so many times, across so many battles, and that were staring at her now. This girl was Quake, Melinda was sure.

But she couldn't be. This girl was a child, surely no more than 16 or 17, and Quake… well, Melinda didn't know exactly how old her so-called nemesis was, but the hero had sponsorships and SHIELD gear, and she knew you had to be at least 18 to obtain those. There were laws about that sort of thing these days.

Melinda opened her mouth to speak, although she had no clue what to say. The "*what the hell?*" that was ringing in her mind didn't seem appropriate at the moment. Before she had a chance to formulate something more articulate, however, the girl – Quake? – promptly burst into tears.

"I'm sorry," she blubbered. "I'm sorry, I didn't know who—"

"Can we have a moment, please?" Melinda asked abruptly, prompting the doctor and nurse present to nod and leave the room. It wasn't to save the girl from the embarrassment of crying in front of strangers – Melinda was a villain, after all, and not so soft as to worry about her nemesis' feelings like that – but more to give them both the freedom to get to the bottom of whatever the hell was going on here.

Melinda wanted to demand answers from the kid, but the girl was still crying, eyeliner starting to run, and babbling on about something that Melinda couldn't make out over the hiccup-y tears. Even if Melinda hadn't been able to sense the genuine fear, pain, and helplessness radiating off the girl, it was more than obvious just to the naked eye. This kid was bad off.

Wordlessly, Melinda reached over and placed a hand on the girl's shoulder. It gave the appearance of a comforting gesture, but it served the clandestine purpose of allowing Melinda to more accurately get a sense of the girl's emotions. Her powers were strong enough to pick up on emotions without physical contact, certainly, but things always became more finely attuned with touch and she needed to be 100 percent sure this wasn't a trap.

The girl looked up, startled by Melinda's hand. The fear and pain Melinda had felt pouring out of the kid from across the room were all there, sharper now, and with an added layer of shame that Melinda had missed before. Kid must have been trying to bury that one pretty deep.

"I wasn't sure you'd come," the girl murmured, scrubbing at her eyes with the sleeve on her non-casted arm and further smudging her ruined makeup. Her sleeve bunched up as she scrubbed, revealing that the skin on this arm was covered in a rainbow of bruising. Melinda bristled, and the girl pulled away from Melinda's touch. "Do you… know who I am?"

"Yes. And you know who I am, apparently."

"I'm sorry, I… They wouldn't let me leave without an adult…"

"And for some reason I was the only adult you could think of? Why not call your parents? Or your SHIELD handler?" Melinda asked, probably more brusquely than she should have. She couldn't help it. She'd had two years of trading barbs with the kid, and the habit was hard to drop.

The girl shifted uncomfortably and looked away. Another pulse of shame found its way to Melinda, this one close enough to the surface that Melinda could feel it even without putting her hands on the girl. Touchy subject.

"I'm sorry," the girl said again. "Look, if you just sign the papers, we can both leave and pretend like this never happened."

"What did happen, exactly?"

"It was stupid," she shook her head. "I tripped and fell down some stairs at my apartment. The bones in my arms… they're fragile, and without my gauntlets…"

"Your *bones* are *fragile*?"

“My powers. Not exactly bone-friendly, and I’m out of my CalciFi pills.”

“Calcify?”

“For rapid bone restoration and healing. SHIELD tech.”

“Ah. And you can’t get more?”

The girl shook her head. “Not for a while. SHIELD’s pretty stingy with their experimental meds.”

Melinda didn’t say anything to that. She knew all too well about SHIELD’s medical policies, not that she’d admit that to Quake. Or anyone these days.

“I know this is weird,” the girl mumbled. “I shouldn’t have called you —”

“Well, you did, and I’m here now. So we might as well get you out of here.”

Melinda felt gratitude rush out of the girl.

“Seriously? You’ll help me?”

“I think the doctors would be suspicious if I just left you here. Me being your ‘mother’ and all.”

They called the doctor back in then, and before long there were discharge papers in hand. Outside the hospital, Quake turned back to Melinda.

“Well, thanks. I guess I’ll probably see you around at some point when we’re… dressed up.” She turned and started walking down the sidewalk.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

Quake stopped, turned back around. “Um… home?”

“On foot?” Melinda arched an eyebrow. “It’s cold, you don’t have a coat. You have brittle bones and a freshly broken arm; you’re not walking. And you don’t look old enough to drive.”

“I’m 17.” Quake almost looked like she was pouting at the accusation about her age, which did not help her appear older. “And it’s not that

big a deal. I walked all the way here just fine; I think I can make it home."

"Oh, for the love of god, would you just come with me? I'll drive you home."

Melinda had expected more of a fight, but Quake followed behind her wordlessly until they got to the parking lot. She scanned around as they walked, like she was looking for something.

"What?"

"Where's the Storm Cycle?" she asked.

Melinda fought the urge to snort. "I came here as June Johnson. I drove a Honda Civic. It'd be a little conspicuous to show up on a souped-up battle bike, don't you think?"

"Oh, yeah." Quake looked embarrassed. "I guess I just never thought about you as a civilian. Is June Johnson your real name?"

"Is Daisy Johnson yours?"

"…no."

"Well, I think you've answered your own question, then."

Melinda unlocked the Civic and they both climbed in.

"Where am I taking you?"

"West side. 52nd and Carter," Quake told her. Melinda frowned, but didn't say anything. That part of town was notoriously rough. Unusual for a SHIELD-affiliated hero to live somewhere like that.

"So, uh, if your name isn't June, what should I call you?" the girl asked as they drove through the city. "It seems a little weird to call you Maelstromeda when you're wearing jeans and a leather jacket."

"Jesus, kid, are you wearing a wire or something? Trying to get me to spill my secret identity?"

"I'm not wearing a wire!" Quake protested. With her good hand, she plucked at her flannel shirt, flapping it back and forth to demonstrate the lack of microphones or hidden bugs tucked into the fabric. She huffed and flopped back in her seat. "I'm just trying to make conversation."

“I’m not really much for conversations,” Melinda said dryly.

“Besides, you’re the one who’s about to know my home address. If you wanted to, you could come back tonight and blow up my whole apartment building.”

“Do you really think I’d do that?”

“No,” Quake admitted, after a beat. “No, you don’t kill people.”

Not anymore, Melinda thought. *Not after Katya*. “Is that why you picked me to call? Because I don’t kill people?”

“No,” the girl said again. “At least, not entirely. I don’t know. We’ve spent a lot of time together.”

“We’ve spent a lot of time fighting each other.”

“You pull your punches when you fight me.”

“I do not!” Melinda insisted, frowning. She *did* pull her punches, but she didn’t realize anyone could tell. So sue her, she tried to be a little more careful when she fought Quake. She might not have known Quake was a kid, but she could still tell Quake was a young hero, new on the scene. There was no point in hurting the kid more than what was necessary for a given job. Rough her up enough to make a show, make sure SHIELD and the sponsors got their money’s worth out of Quake’s abilities, but never try to cause lasting damage. Melinda knew firsthand that there were enough other people in the world who could take care of that for the girl, especially if she was already wearing the SHIELD tag.

“You do so,” shot back the girl. “You always stick to incapacitation. Plenty of other villains don’t do that.”

“Well, what about you? I’ve seen you level an entire building in a fight with Gravitron. You’ve never used your powers like that on me.”

“I don’t know,” the girl sulked. She tried to cross her arms, but the cast made it difficult. “I guess ‘cause I like fighting you more than I like fighting a lot of the other villains. I don’t want to put you out of commission permanently.”

“As if you could put me out of commission,” scoffed Melinda.

“I literally have earthquake powers,” Quake said, shaking her head in

disbelief. “You’re a good fighter, but you’ve got, what, a little run-of-the-mill super strength-agility combo and that cool sword? Clearly one of us could take down the other in a heartbeat if she really wanted to.”

Melinda forgot sometimes that most people didn’t know about her empath powers. Not that those would do much against an actual earthquake, true, but still nice to know that she still had a few tricks up her sleeve when it came to the stubborn teenager.

They rode in silence for a while, city blocks and skyscrapers rolling past them as Melinda navigated the car through traffic and over towards the west side. Quake’s neighborhood wasn’t exactly close to the hospital. It would have taken her over an hour to walk home.

It was true that Melinda wasn’t much for conversation in most cases, but there was one question that was burning in the forefront of her mind. Well, really a whole host of questions about this entire, bizarre situation, but one question that mattered the most, because it was the one that affected her personally.

“I have to know,” she began, and she saw out of the corner of her eye that Quake winced, apparently dreading an incoming question, “how did you find my number? And my name, for that matter? That information’s not exactly public.”

Quake’s body language relaxed, confirmed by the feeling of relief that Melinda could sense lapping at her subconscious. Clearly whatever question she had been fearing, Melinda hadn’t asked it.

“I’ve kind of got a thing with computers,” Quake admitted, not without a hint of pride. “After I first got assigned to you, I did some research of my own. Tapped into some back channels, did a little digging on the dark web and things like that. Maybe… cracked into a few bank records here and there.”

“Not very heroic of you,” Melinda smirked.

“It’s not like I was going to use the info to go after you or anything!” protested Quake. “It was just about, you know, ‘know your enemy’ and all that jazz. Like… digital recon.”

“And so somehow you managed to find June Johnson and connect her to me?”

“June Johnson, April Wong, Heidi Martin, Deb Chen, Camille Wray…”

Melinda could feel herself growing more and more unnerved as Quake rattled off nearly every alias and pseudonym she had used since first going into the field. She did notice, at least, that the name Melinda May wasn't on her list, but the kid had been serious when she'd said she was good with computers. Some of those identities were buried so deep Melinda had nearly forgotten about them herself, and here this teenager, this *child*, was, ticking them off her fingers like it was no big deal.

"I couldn't find everything on you," Quake continued, oblivious to how unsettled Melinda had become. "SHIELD had some files on you that were so tied up and redacted that I couldn't get at them, and I couldn't find anything that gave me conclusive evidence about which one of those names is really you, but I know a lot." She paused and gave Melinda a quizzical look. "Didn't you ever do that for me? Try to figure out my secret identity? Isn't that, like, villainy 101?"

"Knowing your identity isn't relevant to the type of work I do," Melinda said simply. It was true, it didn't matter to her who was behind the mask when she was facing off with a hero for a primetime sponsor check or trying to pull off a job for an employer without hero interference. But it also was something that Melinda had decided for herself a long time ago – everyone was better off if she left personal lives and secret identities out of the equation.

A brief flicker of regret fluttered up in her chest. Maybe it hadn't mattered to her who was behind the mask when she went to battle against someone, but maybe if she'd cared about that fact a little bit more, if she'd actually looked into her opponents more closely, she might have realized sooner than today that she was fighting a literal child on an almost weekly basis.

She shuddered to think about how things could have gone horribly wrong if she'd hit Quake a little too hard or swung her sword a little too forcefully. *A child. How could SHIELD allow a* child *out in the field? After everything…*

"This is me up here," Quake said, pointing and dragging Melinda back out of her own spiraling thoughts.

Melinda pulled the car up in front of the most dilapidated-looking apartment complex she'd ever seen – and living in Metro City, she'd seen a lot of crummy apartments. At least half the windows were broken or boarded up. There was so much grey, sooty dirt caking the sides that Melinda couldn't remotely tell what the original color of the

building had been, and the rainbow of graffiti didn't help matters, either. Scraggly weeds twisted out of cracked sidewalks that glimmered with broken glass, and uncollected heaps of trash bags overflowed from a dumpster on one side. To top it all off, the whole building lilted to one side, giving the impression that a strong gust of wind would probably send the whole thing toppling down any day now. It was, to be perfectly blunt, an absolute shithole.

"This is where you live?"

"Is there a problem?" Quake scowled at her, defiance radiating plainly from the passenger side of the car.

"That depends, are you up to date on your tetanus and rabies shots?" Melinda deadpanned.

"Look, it's the only place I can afford, and the landlord doesn't ask questions or run background checks, so why don't you just lay off?"

"What do you mean, it's the only place you can afford?" asked Melinda, holding up a hand. "Why are you the one paying rent? You're a teenager. Where are your—?"

"I live alone, okay? It's not a big deal, so don't make it one."

"You live alone. Here." Melinda repeated slowly, frowning up at the building that most definitely should have been condemned twenty years ago.

"It's not like I'm in any danger. I'm literally a superhero," Quake pointed out.

"You're also literally a child—"

"I'm 17—"

"A *child*," Melinda stressed. "How is this even legal? You're a minor."

"I told you, the landlord—"

"In fact," Melinda cut her off, raising a single finger to stop Quake's rebuttal in its tracks, "how is *any* of this legal? How are you a hero at 17? We've been fighting each other for nearly two years, which means you started heroing when you were… Jesus, 15? There's no way that's above-board. SHIELD isn't allowed to—"

"SHIELD doesn't know," Quake hissed. She narrowed her eyes, anger

searing off her like hot, solar flares, and raised a finger of her own, jabbing it towards Melinda. “And they’re not *going* to know. I told you, I’m good with computers. I faked my records. SHIELD thinks I’m 20, that I joined up right when I turned 18. I… I needed the job. I needed money, and I figured *hey, I’ve already got powers, so I might as well put them to use.* Earn some money and try to do some good at the same time. Help people, you know?”

“I don’t understand,” Melinda shook her head. “Why the hell did you need money and a shitty place to live when you were only 15 years old? What had you so desperate that you’d fake records and lie to a group as powerful as SHIELD just for a hero contract?”

Quake fell silent. A muscle jumped in her jaw and Melinda could feel that old, familiar shame she’d sensed back at the hospital start to leech into the air inside the car. If Melinda had been a nicer person, maybe she’d have let the girl off the hook, but as it was, Melinda had no problem sitting there and waiting for answers. She had sprung the kid from the hospital and given her a ride home, after all. Surely she was owed a little bit more of an explanation.

“My parents threw me out. For… for being Enhanced. They’d always been anti-Enhanced, so when I was 14 and my powers started showing up, I tried to hide them for as long as I could. Surprise, surprise, earthquake powers are kind of hard to keep under wraps, and when they realized *I* was the reason why things kept shaking and breaking around the neighborhood for months… let’s just say I didn’t really have a lot of time to pack.”

“Shit, kid.”

It was no secret that there were plenty of people out there who harbored anti-Enhanced sentiments, and plenty of people who took those sentiments to the extreme. Despite the fact that costumed heroes were held in almost celebrity status by most of the world, Melinda knew that the admiration and accolades stopped as soon as the cape came off. People feared Enhanceds, but the confines of strict sponsorship contracts and all the red tape from organizations like SHIELD held Enhanceds in check. Enough that regular people felt safe enough to let Enhanceds handle the work of crime-fighting and entertained enough to watch their pay-per-view fights against a campy villain-of-the-week.

She knew it all, yes, but sometimes when you’ve lived in the same, crummy system for long enough, you start to forget how messed-up

things really are. And then there's a homeless teenager sitting in your car, and you remember all over again just how shitty the world is and how cruel people can be, all because of stupid prejudice and fear.

"I don't want your pity, you know."

Melinda studied Quake carefully. Her words and her tone suggested anger, grit, resilience and a hardened heart. But her shoulders sagged slightly, and she averted her gaze. There were hungry hollows in her cheeks and dusty shadows under her eyes. That same feeling of shame swirled around, souring the space, but Melinda was starting to pick up on another emotion, too: the feeble exhale of fatigue.

The girl was tired.

Tired of fighting for survival, for acceptance, for approval. Tired of keeping up a lie, of working a job too taxing for most adults, of battling not just supervillains and monsters, but sharp-tongued bigots and slimy landlords and greedy brand agents, too.

In retrospect, Melinda could only attribute her next decision to a sudden and acute bout of insanity, pure and simple. Anyone in their right mind would never have done what she did. And yet, someone would have to be out of their mind to let a teenager keep suffering like that, to walk away and turn a blind eye until the kid eventually wasted away to nothing or pushed herself beyond a breaking point. So maybe it was insanity, or maybe it was the first clearheaded thing Melinda had done in years. She honestly wasn't sure anymore.

"Go get your stuff, kid, then come back down and get in the car. You're coming home with me."

Chapter End Notes

> Hi friends! Boy, has it been a minute or what? I'm really excited to finally be back on here and writing again :) This story is a project I used to help me get back in the rhythm of writing, and I'm really proud of how it turned out (and the fact that it turned out at all haha). The whole story is finished, so chapter updates should be pretty regular.
>
> I hope you enjoy, and I would love to hear what you think in the comments!
> <3

Chapter 2: An Unusual Roommate

Chapter Notes

> TW for catcalling/gross men being gross, discussions of medical procedures and battle injuries/scars (including scars from a gunshot injury)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Quake had gaped at her when Melinda instructed her to return with her things, clearly not believing her ears.

“What? No. That’s insane, I’m not going home with a villain.”

“You can’t stay here, it’s not safe.”

“I’ve lived here for two years. I promise, it’s fine. And again, since you keep forgetting, I’m a superhero. I know how to take care of myself.”

“Clearly,” Melinda sniffed, gesturing to the girl’s cast and medley of bruises. Quake frowned.

“That happened off-duty, and it was an accident. It doesn’t count.”

“You called me to pick you up from a hospital, so I say it does count.”

“Why do you even care, anyway?” Quake demanded. “Shouldn’t you be, like, giving an evil cackle now that you know your nemesis is broke as shit and lives in a dump?”

“I care because someone as young as you are deserves to have someone looking out for them. An adult.” Melinda paused as she realized how soft that made her sound. Quickly she amended her words. “And mostly because I don’t want to fight somebody who’s weakened by malnourishment and brittle bones. It makes me look bad if the press or my sponsors find out I’ve been beating on a poor kid with no parents and a broken arm.”

“Makes you look worse if you *lose* to a poor kid with no parents and a broken arm, you mean,” Quake smirked.

Melinda was relieved to see that playing up the pride angle seemed to have given her a window of opportunity. “At least let me give you a hot meal and a good night’s sleep. I’ll even throw in some painkillers

for your arm. And if you want to leave after that, I won't stop you."

Quake waffled for a moment, then relented. "Fine. But just for one night."

"Do you need help bringing your stuff down?"

Quake looked like she was about to insist that she didn't need any help, but a second glance at her swollen and casted arm must have given her a reason to reconsider, and she shrugged. "Yeah, I guess."

Melinda parked and followed Quake up the busted sidewalk and towards the building. She tried not to gawk at the disarray around her (or wrinkle her nose at the unholy combination of smells that seemed to emanate from every direction), but she could tell Quake noticed her disapproval. The girl quickened her pace and tried to rush them past a bench that had clearly been set on fire in the past and a group of greasy, middle-aged men that lounged in front of the complex, playing cards. Melinda could feel their leering eyes lingering on her and Quake as they hurried past, and judging by the way Quake didn't react a bit to the wolf whistle that chased her, or the men's subsequent laughter, this was a regular interaction for all of them.

Quake led her up a rickety metal set of stairs to the second level of apartments and down the open-air walkway until she stopped in front of a unit numbered 26B. The six was missing a screw and was dangling upside down, making the number look more like a crooked 29. She fumbled with her keys for a moment, then jimmied the door open with a kick and beckoned Melinda inside.

The apartment itself was tiny, a single room barely big enough to even call a studio apartment, and the interior was just as run-down and dingy as the exterior. On one side, a sink and a hot plate made up what Melinda guessed counted as the kitchen. A piece of plyboard was balanced on an upended milkcrate, creating a makeshift table, and a single lawn chair sat beside it. On the other side, an air mattress made up with a few thin blankets and a pancake of a pillow took up most of the space. The rest was filled with a large, heavy-looking black footlocker that was sealed with a chunky padlock. A laptop sat atop the footlocker, lid closed but still giving off a faint hum of activity.

Quake began hastily filling her backpack with anything she could get her hands on – spare clothes, the power cord to the laptop, a bobbling statue of a hula dancer. Melinda pretended not to watch as Quake tucked a saggy, well-worn, and clearly well-loved stuffed elephant into

a side pocket. One of the elephant's ears had a funny look to it, like it had been chewed on.

"I think that's everything," she said after a few minutes. She gave the room one last look over. "If you could get the trunk… I don't want to leave that here."

Melinda nodded, and hefted the trunk up in one swift, fluid motion, resting it on her shoulder.

Quake looked impressed. "That thing's super heavy."

"Run-of-the-mill super strength, remember?"

Quake smiled sheepishly. "Okay, yeah, I probably shouldn't have made a dig at your powers."

"Do I want to know what's in here?"

"Mostly it's all my… work gear," Quake said, settling on a euphemism for what Melinda understood to be all of her heroing equipment. "Not really something I like to leave out in the open, you know? Pretty much anything I earn that doesn't go to rent or food goes to gear, so it's definitely the most valuable stuff in here."

"Heard," Melinda nodded. "Handle with care."

They left the apartment then, Quake taking care to lock back up before they retraced their steps back to the car. The greasy men whistled and laughed again as they passed.

"Where you going with all that stuff, honey?" one of them called. "Taking a little trip? 'Cause I can give you a good ride if you need one."

Melinda was about to whirl around and clock him across the head with Quake's footlocker, but the girl stopped her with a jerky shake of the head and a warning look.

"It's not worth it," she muttered. "That's my landlord. He'll up my rent if you do anything. Just ignore him."

"He's disgusting," Melinda sneered, once they were out of earshot of the men. "I ought to dropkick him into the sun for talking to you like that. Does he know you're underage?"

"It's just talk," Quake assured her. "He never does anything but run

his mouth. It's gross, but it's easy to ignore. Besides," she added, a small smile creeping onto her face, "I've got my own ways of getting payback."

She turned slightly, and Melinda copied her, looking back over her shoulder to where the men were still sitting on the other side of the lot, laughing like idiots over the landlord's crude comments. With a subtle flick of her non-broken wrist, Quake sent an almost imperceptible seismic wave across the parking lot. Tiny, so tiny Melinda might not have noticed she'd done it if she hadn't been watching closely, but powerful enough to shake the ground slightly under the men's chairs and send the landlord, who had been leaning back in his own chair gleefully, lording over his antics, toppling backwards. He tumbled out of his chair and crashed onto the pavement below, falling flat on his ass. The other goons howled with laughter at his misfortune, and Melinda caught a mischievous glimmer of pride in Quake's eye before they both turned around again and made their way to the car.

"Not bad," Melinda nodded, once they'd loaded Quake's stuff into the trunk and turned the car back out onto the road. "Your control has gotten a lot more precise, I see."

"I've been working on it a little."

Quake grimaced slightly and tried to massage her wrist, but the cast made it difficult. "Definitely paying the price for my little revenge, though."

"All those bruises on your arms… Not just from your fall this afternoon?"

"Like I said, my powers aren't exactly easy on the bones."

"Doesn't quite seem like it's worth the cost."

Quake didn't say anything to that, and Melinda was fine to let silence overtake the car. She had about a thousand thoughts racing around her head at the moment, but none of them seemed appropriate to voice just then. She could feel the stress and exhaustion starting to overtake the rest of Quake's emotions, wearing down her mask of confidence and nonchalance that she'd tried to keep on all afternoon, and she wasn't interested in pushing the kid past an emotional breaking point just then.

Eventually, they made it to Melinda's apartment building, nestled in

one of the city's quieter, more upscale neighborhoods. The contrast between this building and Quake's was stark in nearly every regard, but neither one of them commented on that fact. All of Quake's chatty bravado and clever playfulness from earlier seemed to have disappeared, and she just followed behind Melinda wordlessly as they parked in the leveled garage under the building and rode the elevator up to the 21st floor.

She did finally speak when the elevator doors slid open and revealed that Melinda's apartment was actually the penthouse at the top of the building.

"Holy shit. You live here?"

"My work has been lucrative over the past several years," Melinda said simply. "I prefer to live comfortably."

The main room had floor length windows all along the east wall, giving a spectacular view of the Metro City skyline. It looked especially nice at sunrise, Melinda's favorite time of day, when the first golden rays of light illuminated the peaks and valleys of the skyline from behind.

Quake wandered numbly into the room, dragging a finger across the plump, plush furniture almost without thought, and then drifted over toward the kitchen, which was anchored around a large island counter with a black marble top.

"No kidding," she murmured, drinking in the hardwood floors, the fireplace, the fancy television that Melinda hardly ever watched. "You must be freaking loaded to afford a place like this."

"I've lived in my share of shoeboxes, too," Melinda offered in a half-hearted attempt to spare the kid's feelings. "Back when I was starting out, I lived in a place not much bigger than yours. And my husband and I lived—" She stopped herself short, throat tight at the slip of the tongue.

"You're married?"

"No," Melinda said with quiet finality. "Not anymore."

Quake must have gotten the message, because she didn't press for follow-up answers about the matter.

"I guess being a villain probably pays better than being a hero," she

said, redirecting the conversation and circling back around to the middle of the room, where Melinda was still waiting. It was uncomfortable having someone unfamiliar in your living space, she realized, especially someone like Quake. An enemy, a hero… a kid.

“I think it varies from case to case,” shrugged Melinda. “The big names at SHIELD probably earn more when all is said and done, but yes, villainy does come with certain… liberties when it comes to money.”

Melinda gave Quake the rest of the tour with little fanfare, pointing out the guest room, the guest bathroom, and the doors that led to Melinda’s office and bedroom. “Are you hungry? I normally order Thai on Thursdays, but if there’s something you’d like better—”

“No, Thai’s good,” Quake nodded. “Thanks.”

“You can unpack while I place the order,” Melinda suggested. “And I can bring you a couple aspirin for your arm in a minute, too.”

“Got anything stronger? How ‘bout some of that stuff?” Quake cracked, nodding over at the liquor cabinet. When she caught a look at Melinda’s unamused expression, she flung her hands up in playful surrender. “I’m kidding, I’m kidding. I don’t drink. Geez, you need to lighten up.”

“That whole cabinet’s off-limits. Grown-ups only.”

“I’ve got to admit, a firm stance against underage drinking wasn’t really something I expected from a villain,” ribbed Quake. Against her better judgement, Melinda felt a smile fighting its way out across her own face. It was hard to explain, but something about the kid’s constant humor was wearing her down.

“And shaking me down for booze wasn’t something I expected from a hero,” she ribbed back. “Next thing you’re going to tell me is that laptop you brought here is stolen goods.”

“Nah,” Quake grinned. “I won that in a bet.”

Quake disappeared into the guest bedroom not long after that, armed with a bottle of aspirin and a glass of water that Melinda had gotten her from the kitchen. It took about half an hour before their food arrived, and when Melinda rapped lightly on the guest room door to inform Quake that dinner was ready, she got no reply.

“Hello?” Melinda called softly. “Everything okay in there?” When there was still no sound from the other side, she cracked the door open a hair and peered in, hoping that Quake wouldn’t be upset at the invasion of privacy.

She needn’t have worried – the kid was sacked out, completely asleep and dead to the world. She was still fully dressed, and was curled on top of the comforter, like she hadn’t even thought about turning the bed down before flopping onto it. The arm that was in the cast dangled somewhat awkwardly off the side, and Melinda found herself moving to tuck the arm back onto the bed before she had fully realized what she was doing.

Melinda retreated to the main room, grabbing a blanket off the back of the couch and a notepad from the entryway table. Then she returned to the guest room, draping the blanket over the sleeping teenager and scribbling out a note:

Dinner is in the fridge when you’re hungry. I’ll be in the office until late if you need me.

Melinda hesitated for a moment, debating what to sign the note as, then settled on ‘June.’ Quake knew that wasn’t her real name, but it was a name she knew, and it was a name Melinda was comfortable sharing. And, like the kid had said in the car, it seemed strange to use their codenames now that they were in civilian clothes and sharing a roof. Melinda wondered if she should stop thinking of the kid as ‘Quake,’ but reasoned that if the kid had wanted to share a different name with her, she would have. It wasn’t like the phony name the kid had given the hospital – *Daisy*, Melinda remembered – was any more real than June was for Melinda.

Melinda ate alone, and after she had cleared her own dishes, went back to check on the kid once more. Still sound asleep. Deciding that Quake was probably in a deep enough slumber that Melinda wouldn’t need to worry about her for a while, Melinda slipped into her office, determined to try and pick back up with the project she had been working on when she’d been interrupted by the call from the hospital that afternoon.

She pressed a few buttons on her desk, sending the high-tech tactical and video screens that she used for work back into the wall, hidden behind their secret panels, and sank into the high-backed chair, more tired than she’d realized she was. And her knee was starting to ache again. Maybe she’d just record for an hour or so, then take an early

bedtime. She scooped up the tape recorder – hearing about how easily Quake had accessed her digital data made Melinda feel better about her earlier decision to do this project analog – and clicked the device on.

I wasn't always in the business of villainy. Maelstromeda is a fairly recent invention, only about twelve years old. But people's memories are funny when it comes to heroes and villains. I'm sure there are a few die-hard historians and obsessed fanboys and girls out there who might recall The Cavalry if you asked them, but for most people… heroes fade into obscurity easily, especially the dead ones. And The Cavalry died a long time ago. Melinda May died along with her, but there're even fewer people left who remember her at all.

Everything seemed a lot more black-and-white when I was first starting out. Heroes are good, villains are bad. Heroes save people, villains hurt them. Obviously, as a kid growing up, you don't dream of being a villain. You dream of being an Avenger – a Captain America or a Captain Marvel type. And when I started developing my empath powers as a teenager, it seemed like a dream come true.

Things were different back then; there weren't as many rules and regulations, and applications to the SHIELD Hero Division were open to anyone who could demonstrate Enhanced status. I knew it was a long shot – it's not like sensing people's emotions was a particularly useful power set, at least not compared to flying or energy blasts – but I didn't care. I hoped. I dreamed. I applied. I got in.

I was only 16 – again, different time – so I started out in their junior training program, a rank below rookie and confined to the base, but still a part of the team. Still a part of SHIELD. I trained in combat, in tactics, in espionage, all the usual skills. I mastered my powers, worked to hone them and strengthen them. I thought I stood a good chance at making it onto a black-ops team once I was old enough for field work, something that could use empath powers as a part of undercover work or something like that. It wasn't exactly what I had dreamed of as a kid, but it seemed like the best I was going to do.

Then I got the call up from SciTech. They were starting up a new program, Enhanced Re-Development. EnReD. And I was a prime candidate, they said. I was about 19 or 20 at that point, still young and stupid and hopeful enough that I was willing to jump on any chance to move up. So of course I said yes.

I met more doctors than I could keep track of at first, each one with their

own specialized subsection of the program. I know them all now. Their names are seared into my memory. Their names are a mantra in my mind. Streiten, Zola, Schmidt, Killian, Strucker, Whitehall. The list goes on.

Bits and pieces were explained to me then, but much of what I know now is information I learned later on, either as I advanced through EnReD or after everything fell apart and I began my own investigation. In the beginning, though, I knew only what they told me, and what they told me was this: The EnReD program was created with the theory that Enhanced individuals possessed the genetic capability for further enhancement, beyond their natural-born abilities. Because most Enhanced individuals' powers come from their genetic makeup, some kind of mutation or genetic predisposition for subatomic alteration, there were those within SHIELD who believed that those same individuals' DNA could be more receptive to further, artificial enhancement.

SHIELD had gotten lucky during its formative years when it stumbled across Steve Rogers, a human who could successfully withstand the Super Solider Serum treatment. Attempts to recreate the experiment never reached the same level of success with other test subjects. Until two members of the Super Soldier Serum reverse-engineering team – Doctors Schmidt and Zola – proposed using already-Enhanced individuals for the next round of tests. They had synthesized a relatively stable, albeit crude, reproduction of the serum – now a purported wonder drug they dubbed Triple S – and were eager to see its effects in those whose DNA had already proven malleable.

That was Phase One.

They were already in Phase Two by the time I arrived. Triple S had produced promising results, but the serum had numerous side effects – significant changes to the body and, in some cases, to the mind as well. Other teams were working in tandem, refining the drug and pursuing other methods of enhancement. I was placed in the Centipede group, under the study of Dr. Streiten. Centipede Serum, he told me, hoped to recreate the results of Triple S without the side effects. I wouldn't grow a foot taller or put on 50 pounds of muscle, at least, he assured me.

It was stupid of me, but I agreed. For six months I received Centipede injections and careful monitoring. We saw results quickly, but at first they were only temporary – maybe an hour or two of feeling juiced up, but then back to my normal self. They tinkered with the formula, ran more tests, and continued my injections. I tolerated the serum well, unlike some of the other members of my study group. A few were like me, but just as many more found the stuff too potent, too addictive, too destabilizing. Our

numbers dwindled.

Eventually, they cracked the code, and they found a formula that changed me permanently. My empath abilities stayed intact, but I now had the oh-so-coveted super strength and agility that SHIELD longed for its heroes to all possess. I took another year to retrain, to learn how to use my new strength and dexterity. I was promised a hero contract pending the completion of my training, but just a few weeks before my promotion, SHIELD approached me with a different offer.

The sound of a door stopped Melinda short, and she hastily clicked the recorder off and stowed it in one of the secret compartments hidden within her desk. She listened closely, and soon made out the sound of someone shuffling around the apartment on the other side of the closed office door. The kid must have woken up.

Melinda did a quick once-over to make sure everything incriminating was tucked away and out of sight, then rose from her chair to go and check on her young houseguest.

When she emerged into the main room, the first thing she saw was Quake, still in her same clothes from earlier, rummaging around in the kitchen cabinets.

“Looking for something?”

Quake jumped slightly at the sound of Melinda’s voice, but almost immediately tried to pass it off as a shiver. She straightened up and turned to look at Melinda. Her expression didn’t look particularly guilty or afraid, so Melinda wasn’t surprised when her answer turned out to be innocuous.

“Yeah, do you have any plastic bags or something? I want to shower, but I can’t get my cast wet.”

Melinda nodded, and soon she produced a plastic shopping bag and a few rubber bands, which she used to secure the bag around Quake’s arm. She tried hard not to think about how strange the situation was, her and Quake inches from each other, her hands on Quake’s arm, but neither one of them trying to knock the other one out.

“There are extra towels in the linen closet if you need them,” Melinda said as Quake drifted back toward the bathroom. “I can heat up the leftovers for you while you shower, if you want to eat.”

“Thanks,” Quake nodded. “That’d be good.”

Before long, Quake emerged from the bathroom, scrubbed clean, and settled herself at the island, where Melinda had left a heaping plate of takeout. She looked even younger, now that all of her dark makeup and heavy eyeliner had been washed away and she was shoveling Pad Thai in her mouth like she hadn't eaten in days. Which, Melinda reasoned, she may not have.

"I should have asked earlier – you don't have any allergies do you? I think there are peanuts in that…"

"No food allergies," Quake said, her mouth full. "Just penicillin." She swallowed and flashed a cheeky grin. "But I think if there's penicillin in your takeout food, we've got bigger problems than my allergic reaction."

Melinda studied the kid as she ate, trying to do so without outright staring at her. She had traded out her beanie and flannel and was now dressed in a tank top and athletic shorts, her hair piled up in a bun on top of her head. Without sleeves, it was very easy to see just how bruised and swollen both of her arms looked, and it was hard to miss the other obvious signs of injury that the girl wore on her skin. A long, thin scar snaking down one shoulder toward her back until it disappeared under the tank top fabric. A large, tender looking bruise on the outside of her left thigh that looked suspiciously like a boot print. Scabbed-over cuts on her hands and knuckles.

None of it surprised Melinda – injuries were just part of the job in their line of work – but it gave her an unsettling feeling in the pit of her stomach to see the injuries on someone who looked as young and vulnerable as Quake did now, perching here at her kitchen counter and inhaling noodles like they were air.

"Do you always stare at your guests while they eat?"

Melinda blinked and realized she'd been caught. She cleared her throat and looked away. "Sorry, I was just…"

"I know," Quake said. "I know it looks bad. Worse than it feels, honestly. But it comes with the territory, right?" She issued the last part like a challenge, almost daring Melinda to stop pitying her.

"That's true."

"There's one from you still on here," Quake smirked. She tugged at the hem of her shirt and revealed a faint, almost-healed bruise on her hipbone. "From that good hit you landed with the hilt of your sword a

couple weeks ago." She didn't mention the large, jarringly obvious pair of scars that looked suspiciously like they'd come from gunshot wounds on her stomach, so Melinda didn't either, despite the sudden and irrepressible urge to rip the head off of the person who had shot a teenager in the gut. Twice.

"Sorry for that," Melinda grimaced. "I forget how heavy the hilt can be."

"Don't be, it was a good move. I left myself open, and it was a clean hit. Besides, I got you good, too, if I remember."

"Quaked me back 20 yards," Melinda chuckled approvingly. "My tailbone was sore for a while after that."

"You got any good ones?" Quake asked, inclining her head Melinda's way.

Melinda couldn't quite explain it, why she was letting her guard down like this, but soon she was showing off her own battle scars, chatting with Quake as if it were twenty years ago and she was sitting at the bar at the Krazy Kanoe with Hill and Romanoff and Rambeau, comparing injuries and swapping war stories.

"Oh, this is a good one," Melinda said, rolling up the leg of her pants. "Piece of rebar went straight through me while I was dealing with a Vrellnexian invasion. Job wasn't finished, so I just had to pull the damn thing out and keep going. Actually took a Vrellnexian clean out with it not long after."

"Okay, yeah, that's badass," grinned Quake. "And also super old. Wasn't the last Vrellnexian invasion, like, 25 years ago?"

"22, if you must know."

"Like I said, super old," teased Quake. "I remember learning about it in SHIELD training." A curious look crossed her face. "Why were you fighting Vrellnexians back then? Wasn't that a SHIELD mission?"

Melinda paused for a moment, then gave an evasive answer she hoped wouldn't rouse much suspicion. "A threat like Vrellnexians tends to be an all-hands-on-deck sort of situation."

"I guess that makes sense," Quake nodded. "No point in being a villain if the whole world gets ravaged by hostile space roaches. So, what else you got?"

“Let’s see,” Melinda said, happy for the change of subject, “Scar here on my middle from taking a sword to the gut. My sword, as a matter of fact. That’s how I got it. I was fighting the Shrike Queen, Izel, and her right-hand man, Sarge. Got stabbed by one of them. Managed to stay on my feet long enough to use the sword to take them both down, and kept the sword for myself afterwards.”

Quake looked impressed. “No way.”

“These,” Melinda tugged at the collar of her shirt to show off twin scars on either side of her collar bone, “are from electrical wires. I was fighting Face-Off – she’s inactive now, but back then she was a first-rate pain in my ass, could polymorph her face to imitate people – and she had me pinned at a hotel bar. Ripped the wires out of the overhead light and zapped me. I got the flip on her eventually and put the wires in her face, instead.”

“Shit,” Quake laughed. “Remind me never to piss you off.”

“The rest aren’t nearly as interesting,” Melinda said with a wave of her hand. “Knife scar on the shoulder, bum knee from too many hard falls, that sort of thing. Make sure your super suit has reinforced joints on it, by the way. Nobody ever warned me when I was starting out, but joint damage can be a killer in our line of work if you don’t protect your knees and shoulders properly from the get-go.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, grandma,” smirked Quake.

“You wish you had a grandma as cool as me,” Melinda ribbed back without thinking.

Quake’s smile dimmed slightly, and she shifted in her seat. She gave a weak chuckle. “Yeah. Although I guess you’re probably not really old enough to be my grandma, technically.”

“Not impossible,” Melinda conceded, “but in most cases, no.”

“How old are you, exactly?”

“I’ll be fifty later this year,” Melinda told her. She made a small face in Quake’s direction, a peace offering. “Not that it’s any of your business, whippersnapper.”

“I guess it’s a good thing we live in a concrete jungle like Metro City, otherwise you’d be yelling at me to get off your lawn,” Quake said, her playful smile returning. “Next thing I know, you’ll start telling me

about how kids like me have it too easy these days and how you had to fight heroes uphill both ways in three feet of snow way back when."

"Obviously you've never heard of Donnie Gill. Called himself Blizzard, had cryokinetic powers, wanted to freeze the world… very annoying to fight if your super suit didn't have temperature controls."

"And the hill?"

"Metro City's always had pretty flat terrain," Melinda said. "Even before someone like you came along with the power to level it."

"You know," Quake said, stifling a yawn, "all these people you talk about fighting in your stories… they don't really sound like the kind of enemies a villain would have. I mean, Vrellnexians, the Shrike Queen, some whack-o trying to freeze the planet… those sound more like threats SHIELD would take on."

"It's late," Melinda said, after a beat too long. She gestured at the second yawn Quake was trying to fight off as a means of proving her point. "We both could use some sleep. I'll see you in the morning."

"Oh… yeah," Quake agreed. She sounded confused by Melinda's sudden shutting down of the conversation, and the emotion that rippled away from her confirmed it. "Yeah, you're right. Um, goodnight, I guess."

"Goodnight."

Chapter End Notes

> You guys. All your nice comments on the last chapter made me cry. Do I cry at a lot of things? Yes, but I seriously cannot express to you all how much it means to hear from you all and to see so many familiar faces, especially after being gone for so long. All I can say is thank you, thank you, thank you <3 <3 <3
>
> Hope you enjoy this one, too!

Chapter 3: An Unfortunate Discovery

Chapter Notes

> TW for brief discussion of injuries (including GSW) and medical procedures

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Melinda woke at her normal time the next morning, early enough to watch the sun rise over the city skyline while she practiced tai chi. She wasn't surprised that there were no sounds or other signs of life coming from the guest room as she worked through her forms – even she knew that teenagers were notorious for their ability to sleep through most anything.

It wasn't until Melinda had showered, dressed, and finished her granola and tea that she finally heard someone stirring, and what she heard surprised her.

"Damnit. Come on!"

Melinda tapped lightly on the door. "Qu—uh, Daisy?" She winced. It sounded so silly to use the girl's codename, but it sounded equally silly to use her hospital alias. She forced herself to move on from the awkward discomfort. "Everything okay in there?"

The door flew open with a bang, revealing Quake in a tac suit, missing a boot, and trying to tug on one of her gauntlets with her teeth. Clothes were strewn around the floor, and the lid to the footlocker was open, revealing an assortment of high-tech gear, a different tac suit that looked more like Quake's normal hero attire, and an odd collection of masks, extra gauntlets, and what looked like protein bars.

"I can't get my stupid gauntlets—" she growled around the thing in her mouth, "—over my stupid cast. Shit!" In frustration, she flung the gauntlet away from her, sending it smacking into the back wall with a loud thwack.

"Maybe this is a stupid question," Melinda began slowly, "but why do you need your gauntlets right now? Shouldn't you be getting ready for school?"

"There's a mission briefing down at SHIELD, I just got called in. And my handler and SO are both assholes who'll make me run backend –

or worse, bench me – if I'm late again, so I need to have left, like, ten minutes ago—"

"You can't just skip school for a briefing. You're still in high school."

"Which SHIELD doesn't know," Quake reminded her. "They don't care about tardies and absences, because as far as they know, I'm a twenty-year-old rookie hero who's devoted her life to the cause. Which means being in every briefing I get called in for."

Melinda wanted to argue back and try to impress upon the kid how important it was to get a high school diploma, but she knew that wouldn't be the slightest bit productive, so she settled for pinching the bridge of her nose as she bit back her reply.

Quake pulled on her other boot, threw a baggy sweatshirt on over the top of her tac suit to mask it from civilian eyes, and scooped up her gauntlet from the floor, stuffing it in the front pocket of her hoodie. "Gonna have to do," she muttered to herself.

"Maybe SHIELD could take a look at your arm, give you something to help speed up the healing so you can get out of the cast," Melinda offered lamely. "Or maybe they can get you a bigger gauntlet."

"Yeah, maybe. I maxed out my CalciFi allotment for the month, but maybe they'd make an exception for an actual break. Hey," Quake said suddenly, looking up at Melinda. "Is it okay if I leave my stuff here for now? I'd pack it up now, but I'm already late… I can grab it all once I'm done at SHIELD later today."

"It's fine," Melinda said. "You can leave it as long as you need. Clearly my guest room doesn't get a lot of use, so there's no rush to empty it out." She left the other part unspoken – that there was no rush for the kid to clear out, either – but she hoped Quake had gotten the message.

"Thanks." Quake looked a little sheepish, but Melinda could feel the relief slipping away from her. Quake quickly tossed everything back into the trunk and snapped the lock shut. Melinda could see that it was a BioLock – SHIELD tech – so she'd have no chance of opening it without Quake's biometrics. Not that she'd want to pick the kid's footlocker open, but it explained why Quake seemed comfortable leaving her most prized possessions unattended at her nemesis' house.

"What time is your briefing?" Melinda asked.

"In thirty minutes," Quake told her, checking a readout on her

gauntlet that must have given her the time. She sighed and her shoulders sagged. “Which means I’m totally screwed. The trains are always behind schedule in the mornings.”

“I’ll drive you,” offered Melinda. “SHIELD’s only a ten-minute drive from here, twenty if the traffic’s bad. You should be able to make it in time.”

She understood the importance of punctuality in the SHIELD system, and knew how much of a blow it would be to Quake if she got backended or benched for her tardiness. Rookie hero contracts at SHIELD paid shit, so most young heroes made their living through sponsorships until they could move up the SHIELD ranks. Sponsors weren’t much willing to pay out if their heroes spent their time tucked away in the command center instead of out in the field, and being benched too many times could lead to the contract being voided in the blink of an eye.

“Are you serious?”

“We’ll take June’s car; I’ll drop you off a couple blocks early. No one will see, and you’ll avoid being late.”

Quake narrowed her eyes, and suspicion rippled away from her. “Why are you being so nice to me? I mean, I got it yesterday – you felt bad when you saw my place, I cried in front of you, it was all embarrassing and guilt-trippy, whatever – but shouldn’t we be, like… I don’t know… back to normal or something?”

Melinda hesitated. Honestly, she wasn’t entirely sure why she still felt like helping the kid. It’s not like she was responsible for her. Then again, it didn’t seem like *anyone* was responsible for her, and the weight of knowing how much damage could be done to a person, especially a young person, and especially a young person in SHIELD, when there wasn’t someone looking out for them, their best interests… That weight hung around her neck like a yoke of responsibility. Culpability. And yes, maybe guilt. Those same feelings that were pushing her to start her project with the recorder. Maybe Quake was just an… extension… of that project.

Not that Melinda could say any of that to the kid. Not only would it sound incredibly sappy and incredibly suspicious, she could never jeopardize her project while it was in such a nascent state. So she settled for glib instead, and hoped Quake would take the bait.

“I’ve got a slow day today. And if you’re benched, or injured, or

otherwise out of the field, then SHIELD sends some scrub to fight me and I miss out on the nemesis bonus in my sponsorship deals. Trust me," Melinda assured her, despite the lies she was spitting, "getting you back on your feet and in good standing at SHIELD is a purely self-centered interest for me."

"Whatever," Quake shrugged. To Melinda's surprise, she felt something not dissimilar to disappointment clouding around the kid. She wasn't sure what that meant – maybe that Quake could tell she wasn't being honest and was disappointed in her for lying, maybe that Quake just didn't like her answer. Whatever the reason, Melinda didn't have time to dwell on it.

The ride over toward the grey, formidable building that housed SHIELD headquarters (something of a Metro City landmark) was uneventful, and Melinda dropped Quake off a few blocks away with little fanfare. Once she had tailed the kid long enough to make sure she made it safely inside the building, Melinda guided her car back into traffic and headed for Circlegrove Park – a large, sprawling public park at the center of the city.

She had only been half truthful when she'd told Quake she had a slow day today. She didn't have any assignments or meetings scheduled for work today, true, but there was another matter that Melinda was determined to attend to today, and the park was the place to do it.

Melinda parked in a public lot a block away from the park and approached the rest of the way on foot. She followed the winding, circular path deep into the interior of the park, and settled on a bench near the large, decorative fountain. The water had been drained from the fountain for the winter, and the wind that kicked between the trees had a bitter bite to it, so there weren't many passersby in this part of the park. A couple of curious pigeons bobbed over to her while she waited, but didn't stay long once it was clear she didn't have anything to offer them.

"Couldn't have picked a coffee shop, could you?" asked a man's voice nearby. "It's freezing out here." Melinda didn't turn to acknowledge him, but a quick cut of her eyes confirmed the owner of the voice.

"You know I don't like coffee," she said plainly. The man took a seat next to her on the bench.

"How could I? The infamous Face-Off slip-up," he chuckled. Melinda felt herself crack a small smile.

“At least you figured out which one of us was the real one eventually,” she said. One last sweep across their surroundings to make sure no one was watching, then she finally turned slightly to speak to him face to face. “Thanks for coming, Coulson.”

“I was certainly surprised to get your message last night,” Coulson admitted. He was scanning the landscape, too, no doubt looking for the same things Melinda was. “It’s been a long time. Over a decade.”

“I know. And I wouldn’t have made contact, but this… is important.”

“Look, I told you all those years ago that the commlink was for you to use whenever you needed me. I meant it. After everything…”

“You always were a man of your word.”

“I try to be. But I have to admit, some of what you’re asking me for, I don’t know if I can—”

“I know I’m asking for a lot. But I’m hoping you’ll hear me out.”

Coulson didn’t say anything, which Melinda took to mean he was willing to listen. Coulson had been her handler at SHIELD for a number of years, before their individual career trajectories meant their paths diverged from one another within the agency. And then of course everything had gone to shit and Melinda had left it all behind. Coulson had stayed, because of course he did. That was the kind of person he was – the loyalist, the company man. That’s part of what made this conversation so difficult.

“First, you should know, I’m making a record. Of everything. Everything that happened with EnReD, with the girl, with me.”

“May—”

“I’m not planning on using it,” she said quickly. “Not unless I have to. Mostly it’s about just getting it all down. The truth. But I’m not going public with it. I know how that story ends.”

“Too easy for SHIELD to turn it all back onto you,” Coulson nodded. “Pin it all on a bad seed.”

“Which they basically already did. I just was given the benefit of my own death to help cover it all up.”

“Quiet is better than honest,” Coulson murmured. “Standard operating

procedure for SHIELD PR. So if you're not taking your account of things public, why make the record to begin with? And what does this have to do with the information you requested?"

"There needs to be at least one honest record of everything that went down. Maybe someday I'll find the right person to share it with, and the truth won't die with me. Then at least someone will know what really happened."

"I know."

"Yeah, but you won't do anything about it," Melinda said, more sharply than she meant to. She saw the muscles in Coulson's jaw tense, and she could feel the discomfort oozing out of him. "I'm not upset about it, Coulson. You did what you had to. You had your orders, just like I had mine."

"Maybe, but I'm the one who's still following them. You walked away."

"You aren't following them now," Melinda pointed out. "You're talking to me."

"Maybe this is my misguided attempt at atoning for the past."

"You weren't even part of the team at that point—"

"Doesn't mean I don't still lose sleep over it," Coulson said softly. "Over what happened to you."

"Help me out with this and you might start sleeping better," Melinda told him.

"May, I can't just give you information about one of our heroes, and especially not one assigned to fight you. It's a huge conflict of interest. Can you imagine the chaos… the PR nightmare if it got out that a SHIELD agent was leaking classified information about its heroes to the villains that battle them? I can't put one of our own at risk like that."

"I don't want it to hurt her," Melinda insisted. "I want it to help her. I know you don't believe I would actually—"

"No, not you. But this is a slippery slope—"

"Bullshit," Melinda cut him off. "Slippery slopes are excuses people

give when they don't think they have the resolve to set boundaries."

"What if I am setting a boundary?" Coulson shot back. "What if I've resolved not to give you any information on Quake, purely on principle?"

"If you were setting that boundary, you wouldn't be here."

Coulson was silent, and Melinda could sense him pouting. She could feel his curiosity, too, though, and she kept silent herself, determined to draw him back out into the conversation. She knew he still wanted answers from her.

"Why exactly do you want access to Quake's file?" he finally asked. "And what does this have to do with… your story?"

"I can't tell you everything," Melinda cautioned. "It's not safe for any of us if you have the full story, but this is what I can say. I learned some things about Quake last night. Some… personal details, let's say. And what I learned was enough to concern me. I'm worried I'm seeing a pattern. I want her file to make sure that she's not being set up to go through what I went through, and to make sure that SHIELD isn't still running programs it promised to kill years ago. I need assurance that things are different there now, for her."

"If I didn't know better, I'd say it sounded like you cared about her."

"Not caring was never my problem."

"That's true." Coulson went quiet again, and Melinda could feel him wrestling with indecision.

"I suppose it wouldn't be enough for me to give you my word that things are different now?" he offered.

Melinda shook her head. "I need more than that. Some of the things she said—"

"You've talked to her about SHIELD?" Coulson's eyes went wide. "And she told you things? How? When?"

"Don't you go reporting her," Melinda said sternly. "Nothing she said was classified or compromising. It was just, you know, shop talk. But I know enough about how SHIELD operates for some of that shop talk to raise some red flags. And it's not just SHIELD. She doesn't have anyone looking out for her on the outside. I just… I don't want her

slipping through the cracks the way people have before."

"I must be losing my mind," Coulson muttered with a shake of his head. "I could lose my job for this."

"You're a good man, Coulson. SHIELD badge aside," she smirked. "I promise, this won't get back to them."

Coulson reached inside of his coat and withdrew a thin datapad. He passed it to Melinda without a word.

"I'll destroy this when I'm done," she told him, getting to her feet. "Do you want confirmation?"

"I trust you," Coulson said. He looked up at her, locking eyes. It didn't take an empath to know there were layers to that statement.

May gave him a small nod, then slipped away down the path, tucking the datapad into the purse she'd brought as a part of her civilian getup. She knew Coulson would wait several minutes before moving himself, to avoid drawing attention to their rendezvous by leaving at the same time. They'd gotten the same training, after all.

Melinda waited until she was home and tucked safely away in her office before activating the datapad. It was a newer model than she had last used, but Melinda recognized the design enough to know this particular device was little more than a glorified digital storage device. Something that specific information could be loaded into for sharing, but without any larger network connectivity or access. She wasn't surprised. Coulson might have been willing to give her the information she requested, but he wasn't flexible enough to hand her free reign of the full SHIELD system.

She flicked through the basics first – Quake's personnel file, which, as far as Melinda could tell, was entirely filled with false information. It made sense – if you were creating a new identity to apply to SHIELD with, why leave any fingerprints of your old life among the details? The date of birth was clearly made up, since it made Quake look three years older than she was, and the address listed in the file was not remotely close to the crumbling shanty-stack Quake called home. Melinda wondered about the name listed on the file: Skye Powers. Probably a fake one, made up when Quake invented an identity to use for her SHIELD application. It certainly sounded like the kind of name a young teenager would make up on the spot if she was trying to get into a superhero program, Melinda thought with a faint smile.

Notably, there was no one listed as next-of-kin, and the emergency contact section was filled in not with the name of a friend or family member, but with the same names Melinda found listed as Quake's handler and SO. The handler was someone she knew – Jasper Sitwell, a pencil-pusher of an agent she'd crossed paths with a few times back in her SHIELD days. Melinda wasn't shocked that Quake considered him an obnoxious stickler, and she wasn't shocked that Sitwell was the type to threaten benching a hero for tardiness. Twenty years ago, people around SHIELD had joked about the stick up Sitwell's ass; obviously he hadn't changed much.

The SO on file wasn't someone Melinda recognized, someone named Grant Ward. The fact that he had a codename – Berserker – led Melinda to believe that he must be a hero rather than an agent. She wondered briefly about the supervision structure that seemed to be in place. In her experience, most people working at SHIELD had either a handler or an SO, depending on their role, but not both. And certainly not one who was a standard agent and one who was a possibly Enhanced hero. She made a mental note to try and learn more about the change, either from Quake, or possibly from Coulson, if she had to shake him down again.

Finishing with the sparse personal and biographical information, Melinda swiped at the datapad until she found the section of the file she was most curious (and worried) about: Quake's medical logs and her program records.

The first thing Melinda noticed was the absence of EnReD in Quake's program enlistments. On the surface, a good thing. It meant that at least on paper, SHIELD was sticking to its vow to dismantle the godforsaken program. But Melinda knew better than to think that just because the name EnReD was missing from a list didn't mean that the spirit of the program – and the spirit that had created EnReD and other programs like it in the first place – wasn't still alive and well within the organization.

She read carefully, making note of the things that weren't familiar to her. The Initiate program was standard practice for people first joining SHIELD, as was the Rookie Hero bootcamp, tac/combat training, and specialist intensive that Quake had notched in her file. But a few of Quake's resume items stuck out – a program labeled only "BUS" that she had been a part of for a year, immediately after the end of her basic training, something named "Caterpillars" for six months after that, and Quake's current program assignment, which was called "Secret Warriors."

Melinda didn't recognize any of those operations, which was necessarily surprising. It was reasonable that SHIELD would have countless new projects and programs in the fifteen years since she'd worked there. Still, she couldn't help but speculate on what exactly Quake had been involved with in her two years at SHIELD, and what might have been asked or expected of the kid. Her mind raced at the name 'Caterpillar,' conjuring up images of furtive labs and shadowy tests, determined to metamorphosize SHIELD's young heroes into extra-enhanced butterflies. Into Secret Warriors, perhaps.

A shiver ran down her spine, and Melinda gave herself a shake. She was jumping to conclusions. Coulson seemed to be under the impression that things were above-board these days. She wasn't sure she fully trusted his assessment on that front, hence the file snooping, but maybe it would do her some good to at least give his word more weight than she might otherwise be inclined to. She swiped into the medical logs, hoping that Quake's medical record would, if not shine some light on her SHIELD history, at least ease some of Melinda's consternation about Quake being the subject of twisted experimentation.

A lot of the logs were basic vitals and biological data, tracked carefully since Quake's admittance into SHIELD – height and weight, blood pressure and heartrate, all sorts of blood chemical levels that meant little to Melinda, and, interestingly enough, regular bone density scans. She wondered if those were special-ordered because of Quake's powers. Not long after Quake had cleared her first round of training, Melinda found a note for regular prescription of CalciFi – the bone-healing drug that Quake had mentioned a few times. Its administration seemed to be highly regulated, but Quake's bone density readings did seem to level out once she started receiving the drug.

Maybe SHIELD really had learned its lesson. Maybe they were sticking to the straight and narrow.

Melinda continued reading, scanning briefly through Quake's psych evals (all of which seemed very surface level and very much like the kinds of answers Quake would have practiced giving ahead of time, to ensure no red flags popped on the evaluations) and the logs of her various injuries and treatments. Most of those weren't surprising, after their conversation last night – hero-typical injuries and wounds, many of which Melinda had seen evidence of with her own eyes. Stitches here, SteriStrips there, one round of concussion protocol after that Gravitron fight last spring. Plenty of braces and soft casts on bone

fractures and breaks, with healing sped up by additional doses of CalciFi. Nothing that stuck out as alarming, until Melinda found the log of the gunshot wound.

Being a medical record, there was no mention of who had pulled the trigger, or what mission Quake must have been on when she'd been shot, but there was a date – one that aligned with her time in the BUS program. That wasn't what frightened Melinda. No, the injury didn't scare her. Enraged her, definitely, that someone would do something so deplorable to a kid who was barely sixteen at the time, but sadly not as shocking as it should have been. It wasn't the injury that made her heart leap into her throat; it was the treatment plan.

Standard GSW protocol ineffective. Extraordinary measures implemented. G.H.325 administered under the advisement of Dr. Streiten and Agent Sitwell. Response immediate and effective, rehabilitation and full recovery expected. Patient's response indicates potential receptibility to Terrigen: pending recovery, patient will be recommended to Project Terrigenesis.

Melinda felt like her stomach had been turned to ice. How stupid she had been to trust Coulson, to give SHIELD the benefit of the doubt. How naïve she had been to think they'd keep their word and shut down all that insidious shit that had ruined so many lives. After everything that had happened, they were still playing mad scientist, still hurling kids toward the sun and hoping they'd grow wings before they crashed and burned.

She slammed the datapad to her desk and reached for the old commlink she had never expected to use at all, much less twice in twenty-four hours.

Coulson had some explaining to do.

Chapter End Notes

> Some new complications for Melinda here - we'll see where they take her! Sorry the chapter was a bit later than I intended, I wasn't able to get to a computer until today! Hope you all enjoy <3

Chapter 4: An Unsurprising Answer

Chapter Notes

> TW for (non-specific/non-graphic) discussions of medical procedures/experiments (including on teenage/child subjects)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“It smells like fish, but at least you picked some place with walls this ti—What the hell?”

Coulson yelped and ducked as he entered the abandoned cannery. The knife Melinda had thrown at him whizzed harmlessly over his head and lodged cleanly in the wooden support beam behind him. He hadn’t needed to duck; Melinda’s aim was near perfect, and she was only trying to clip his ear, not take his eye out.

“‘*What the hell*’ doesn’t even begin to cover it,” she growled, shoving her forearm into his clavicle and pushing him roughly against the beam, the side of his face an inch away from the still quivering knife. “You said things were different. You gave me your word.”

“What are you talking about? They are,” Coulson spluttered. “Can you please let me up to breathe so we can talk like grownups for a minute?”

Melinda waited a few seconds, drawing the moment out to give him time to wonder if she would actually hurt him, then released him, although not without one final shove into the wood beam for good measure.

“Thank you,” Coulson said hoarsely, massaging his collar bone as he straightened up and tried to readjust his necktie. “Jesus Christ, May, what’s going on? What did I do?”

“You tell me.”

“I’m not a mind-reader, May, you’re going to have to give me something, here. I didn’t think there was anything in those files to upset you.”

“G.H.325,” she spat. “I know that drug. It’s left over from EnReD. Terrigen, Project Terrigensis… I don’t know what *that* shit is, but it sounds a lot like a broken record to me. Also sounds like you lied to

my face about SHIELD changing its ways."

"Oh hell," Coulson made a pained face, and Melinda felt his exasperation and relief comingle, almost stronger than the smell of fish that still clung to every corner of the cannery. "May, it's not like that."

"Explain it to me, then."

"It's classified, I can't—"

"Coulson, you tell me everything there is to tell about Terrigenesis, or so help me god, I will burn SHIELD to the fucking ground, the way I should have fifteen years ago."

There was a tense silence, Coulson staring at her with a hardened gaze, she returning it with pure venom.

"Being a villain changed you more than I realized," he said finally, his tone quiet and bitter. "The old May was never one for extremes."

"The old May was ripped apart by extremes," she said icily. "The new May just learned her lesson."

"You're angry, but you're mad at something that doesn't exist," Coulson told her, softening slightly. "I can't tell you about Terrigenesis, partially because I myself don't know much about it, and partially because I've already crossed a line giving you Quake's file. But please believe me when I tell you, I know enough to know it's not like EnReD."

"You're giving experimental, power-enhancing drugs to kids and recommending them for further exposure when they can tolerate the stuff," she glared. "Sounds pretty pitch perfect for EnReD to my ears."

"G.H.325 isn't as experimental as it once was, and Terrigen—" Coulson stopped himself, blinked. "Wait, did you say kids?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, I meant fully mature 20-year-olds," Melinda sniped quickly, cursing herself internally for nearly blowing Quake's cover. "Or I suppose she was 19 when you dosed her, technically. Which is so much better."

"I know she's young, but she's an adult. She knows what she signed up for," Coulson sighed.

“That’s what I thought, too.”

“Look, it was a bad situation. She’d been shot, she was circling the drain. Some of her early tests had shown genetic markers that indicated she could potentially respond well to G.H.325, and the medical team didn’t have a lot of other options at that point. She’s green, but she’s a good hero. We were trying to save her life.”

“That part I can understand,” Melinda said, shedding some of her hostility. Coulson seemed to be trying to level with her, and she didn’t want to seem ungrateful. “It pisses me off, but that’s my own issue with the stuff. I get that. I get trying to save her life. But I know what G.H.325 does. Or is supposed to do. So when I see that her reaction to the stuff gets her flagged for a new program—”

“Your mind immediately goes to EnReD,” Coulson nodded. “I get it. Look, EnReD was reckless. No one at SHIELD wants to admit it, but it was. That was one of the reasons it rightfully got shut down. Terrigenesis isn’t like that. It’s safer, more focused, more controlled…”

“Isn’t it still trying to do the same thing, though?” Melinda asked. “Tell me I’m wrong if I’ve jumped to conclusions, but it sure seems like the scientific principle is the same. Concoct a magic potion in the lab to push Enhanced people’s DNA into forced evolution and test it on your poor, heroic guinea pigs.”

“You’re oversimplifying.”

“Fuck you.”

“It’s different!” Coulson huffed, running a hand through his hair. “There are exponentially more safeguards, more regulations and restrictions. The people who get recommended have to meet a whole host of criteria now, including specific genetic testing to ensure that their bodies will accept the process and psychological testing to ensure that their minds can handle it. After the invitation, they get to choose to join or not, they know all the risks and benefits. And no kids,” he finished firmly. “Never kids. Not anymore.”

“This is exactly what I was worried about. Exactly what I thought would—”

“Dr. Whitehall always said discovery requires experimentation, and experimental science – experimental SHIELD science – saves lives,” Coulson said. “Things were bad before, but it’s not like that anymore. And the progress that’s been made… There are regenerative medicines

now, thanks to the foundation paved by Centipede. Functional exoskeletons to help amputees and paralysis patients based on Deathlok technology. Memory supplements for amnesiacs and dementia patients created because of what SHIELD did with TAHITI. And all above-board and approved now, thanks to regulations put in place after EnReD shut down."

"Spare me the PR propaganda. If I wanted that, I would have talked to Alexander Pierce." Melinda turned away, unable to look at Coulson's earnest expression. It was bad enough that she could feel his genuine belief that SHIELD was in the right pouring from him. She didn't want to have to see it all over his face, too.

"We all make tough calls every day," he said behind her. "I do. You do. Everyone in SHIELD does. But you have to believe that when SHIELD makes those tough calls, they're doing it with the greater good in mind."

"I believe that's what they tell themselves," she said numbly. "Because that's the same thing they said back then. It's all just a fancy way of saying the end justifies the means, right? Even when the means involves breaking a handful of expendable people down into pieces so small, there's nothing left to reassemble. So long as SHIELD has its next medical marvel ready to put on the market."

"This was a mistake," Coulson said, more to himself than to Melinda. She turned in time to see him shake his head. "You're obviously determined to see the worst in everything SHIELD does, and nothing I have to say is going to change your mind."

"I see the worst in everything SHIELD does because SHIELD continues to show me the worst. They haven't changed. But I guess you have. I guess we both have."

"Guess so," Coulson murmured. "I really am sorry, May. And I know you don't believe me, but we do have Quake's best interests at heart. She's a good asset."

"They always are."

Melinda still felt at loose ends once she had returned home. Quake hadn't come back yet, and Melinda could feel her skin crawling with the need to do something – hit something, maybe – after everything she'd read and everything she'd spoken with Coulson about. But even a hard session with her kickboxing dummy hadn't helped much, so

after she cooled down, stretched, and showered, Melinda retreated to her office, hoping that maybe some work could take her mind off things.

She ran through her messages, most of which didn't require much of her: A payment confirmation for a tail job she'd done last week for Roxxon, a notification about her 'Teas of the Month' subscription… nothing special.

Her final message came from Luther Banks, assistant to Rosalind Price. Ros headed up the shadier side of the ATCU, a theoretically neutral organization that responded to threats and incidents involving Enhanced people. They infamously turned down the chance to collaborate closely with SHIELD back in the day, so SHIELD had never looked favorably on the ATCU, despite the organization not being explicitly villainous the way a group like Hydra or AIM proudly claimed to be. That was enough to make them appealing business partners in Melinda's eyes, even if the work she did for Ros was mostly shadow work, off the books.

She listened to the message from Banks:

"Afternoon, Maelstromeda. Banks calling. Ms. Price would like to offer you a new job, corporate in nature. Please reply through the usual channels if you're interested. Let us know by tomorrow."

Melinda wasn't picky, necessarily, about the jobs she chose these days – she preferred the term 'selective' – but there was a bit of a balancing act. While she appreciated the shades of grey that working for Rosalind offered, her reputation as a villain made it difficult to work for the ATCU full time. So she peppered in other employment for appearances' sake more than anything: A bank heist here, sabotaging a SHIELD lab there, stealing Stark trade secrets to selling them Hammer whenever she was bored. Things like that, so no one would get the idea that Maelstromeda had gone straight-arrow and become nothing more than an ATCU lackey.

But if she was being honest, Melinda liked working for Ros the best. Ros was an all-business, no-bullshit type, which Melinda appreciated, and Ros saw the world in much the same way as Melinda. She also understood about Andrew, which mattered more than Melinda would probably care to admit to anyone.

Melinda picked up one of her work phones and dialed the number for Lucky Louie's Garden Supply shop, then waited for the voice on the

other end of the line.

“Lucky Louie’s Garden Supply, we’ve got two green thumbs up.”

“There’s a thunderstorm coming in tonight. I need a new watering can.”

“One moment, please.”

Melinda waited as the line clicked through the transfer channels. A new voice answered, one she knew well.

“Access ID?”

“Cyclone-11-20-63,” Melinda replied easily.

“Your answer to our inquiry?”

“Affirmative,” Melinda told him. “Send me the files when you’re ready for me.”

“You’ll get them tonight,” said Banks. “Many thanks.”

“Always a pleasure,” she nodded. The line clicked dead, and she leaned back in her chair. At least now she’d have something to occupy her mind for the next few days.

She shuffled a few files around on her desk, fiddled with a pen and a paper clip. Her eyes drifted to the hidden drawer where her tape recorder sat. She hadn’t planned on recording anything today, but the things in Quake’s files were still swimming in her mind’s eye, and Coulson’s words rung in her ears. Without quite thinking, she slid her thumb over the small spot under the desk that unlocked the false bottom in the last drawer on the left.

She clicked on the recorder.

I was supposed to get signed to a hero contract after my time in EnReD. A rookie contract with shitty terms, yes, but a bona fide hero contract, nonetheless. Never in my wildest dreams had I thought it would be possible, but with the new powers Centipede had given me, I was considered valuable enough to put into the field as a hero.

It was about a week before my signing day when Dr. Whitehall, the senior-most agent within EnReD, approached me with an offer. He wanted me to stay with the program, not as a test subject, but as a recruiter. I was one of their great successes, he said, and the best agent of the bunch. He told me

I'd split my time with hero work – still go out in the field to respond to Enhanced incidents, but that my primary function would be to identify candidates for EnReD, coach them through the process, train and mentor them.

It was a lot to process, and I was still young, still full of aspirations and ideals. I didn't think about it as carefully as I should have. Didn't think about what a job like that would fully require of me. I said yes. I own that. That yes haunts me. Keeps me up at night. Knowing that I agreed to everything, that I'm responsible for my own role in everything that happened. SHIELD is guilty of a lot of things, but so am I.

Coulson was assigned to be my handler for fieldwork. We worked well together. I got to live my childhood fantasy of herodom – fighting bad guys, staving off alien invasions. Saving the world, often from the shadows. The Cavalry wasn't flashy, wasn't Avenger-level, but she was good. She was dependable, she was effective, she was tough. She made hard calls, but she believed the company line: that every sacrifice she made was in service of the greater good.

Within SHIELD, I assessed new recruits, studied their powers, their temperaments, their DNA, searching for good candidates for EnReD. It was all internal at that point, mostly with young Enhanced people who had been like me – powered, but not with enough juice to make the jump to hero that they longed for.

We had some early success. Rambeau's daughter came to us when she could manipulate the electromagnetic spectrum. She was slotted into a gamma radiation group and came out with added strength, speed, and intangibility. Amador's time in the Centipede group gave her the same strength and agility as me, plus further enhanced her natural x-ray vision. Campbell's electricity powers were practically doubled in strength after going through the G.H.325 group. SHIELD was so pleased by his results that they asked me to bury his self-reported struggles with substance abuse that came after he had trouble coming to terms with his new abilities and altered genetic makeup.

There were setbacks, too, though, which were met with disappointment by the higher-ups in EnReD. I'm ashamed to admit it now, but those first few years, I was more upset by the feeling that I had failed my superiors than by the damage that I had inadvertently caused. Plenty of people couldn't handle the experiments. The mental or physical toll was too much for many participants, who were quietly released from the program. The lucky ones got therapy or memory rewriting. The less fortunate ones…

The first time I really started to question what we were doing was after Chan Ho Yin. Chan had minor pyrokinetic abilities, but had visions of becoming an Avengers-level hero. Psych evals weren't as thorough back then, so his dreams of grandeur didn't set off the red flags that it should have. I missed it. He tolerated Centipede well, but wasn't content to stop there. He requested to be put through another experiment, another group, and SHIELD's curiosity got the better of them. Chan was sent to Dr. Killian's Extremis group, and his body rejected the procedure. He didn't survive. SHIELD didn't even put his name on the Wall of Valor.

Word was getting around that EnReD was running into more and more dead ends, that the experiments were getting more dangerous and producing fewer results the further they pushed the envelope. It became harder to recruit from within the organization. Dr. Whitehall wasn't willing to close the program, so instead it was decided that our recruitment pool would be widened.

This was about the time that Coulson got reassigned. My hero work and time in the field was getting sparser as EnReD demanded more of my time, and Coulson was a rising star of a handler. SHIELD didn't want to waste him on me, and he got the tap to move up to the Avengers Initiative. I was happy for him, but a part of me was jealous. I wasn't enjoying the EnReD work and would have done just about anything to work at the Avengers level. I guess a part of me hoped that, if I stuck with EnReD and hit that one last, smashing success, then maybe I'd be rewarded with the same promotion Coulson had been handed.

It makes me sick to think of it now, that I was willing to leverage other people's lives, to bet on experiments to earn me the promotion I longed for. I was more than stupid, I was blind, and it was by choice.

EnReD cast its nets farther, started recruiting young people, teenagers and even children sometimes. Whitehall had a theory that younger participants might be better able to withstand the massive changes their experiments caused in their bodies, and he appealed to scared parents, who hoped to help their children with their emerging Enhancements and powers, and to starry-eyed kids who wanted to step into the big leagues with their idols. It didn't sit well with me then, but I stood by silently, complicit. It disgusts me now.

Things deteriorated quickly. Ruby Hale had a horrible reaction to the Gravitonium infusion that Dr. Strucker was testing, her body wracked with uncontrollable gravitational forces and her mind fractured by the weight of it all. Robin Hinton's precognition was supposed to be enhanced by G.H.325, but the stuff addled her head so much that she couldn't tell past

from present from future by the time we'd finished with her. And then there was Katya Belyakov.

A light blinked on the security screen above the office door, and the screen lit up with a camera view of the elevator, the way it did anytime someone pushed the button to access her floor. Melinda looked and saw the grainy image of Quake riding up, leaning against the handrail in that slouchy way teenagers all seem to know how to perform.

In a flash, she clicked the recorder off, stowed it away, and locked down the office. Just as she was shutting down the last screen, she heard the elevator ping and Quake's voice rang out.

"Um, hey. June? I'm back."

Melinda emerged from the office, trying hard to swallow back the emotion that had swirled up when she had started talking about the lost kids of EnReD. As soon as she got a look at Quake, it was easy to do, as confusion quickly replaced the awful guilt.

"Okay, I'm asking the obvious question here," she said, gesturing to Quake's face, which sported a fat lip and a fresh, pinkish-purple bruise blossoming across her nose. "What the hell happened to you?"

"It's nothing," Quake said with a wave of her hand. "Caught an elbow in a spar. I let my guard down."

"You were sparring today? With your arm in a cast?"

"Yeah, well, my SO thought I was being insubordinate for asking too many questions during briefing today." Quake made a face. When she spoke again, her voice was gruff and dropped down an octave, like she was imitating a grouchy man. "'*If you think you know better than your SO, then you need to prove it on the mats, rookie*.' Berserker's a douche on a good day, and his solution to my discipline problems usually involves pushups or extra cardio. On bad days, the solution usually involves fighting."

"Did you win?"

"No," Quake grimaced. "I totally could take him, but he always insists on no-powers sparring. Which is fine for him, he's like 6'2" and his powers come from his Berserker Staff, so he's used to depowered hand-to-hand, but I always have to spend half my focus on remembering not to just quake his ass."

“Your SO uses the Berserker Staff? Regularly?” Melinda felt the blood drain from her face.

Quake looked confused. “Yeah. Why? You know him?”

“No,” Melinda gave herself a shake. “No, I don’t know him. The staff, though… That, I’ve had some experience with.”

“Hurts like a bitch when you get smacked with it,” Quake said with a little laugh. “Maybe worse than your sword.”

“Can’t say I’m surprised.”

“And hey,” Quake said then, brightening up. “Check it out.” She brandished her broken arm, revealing that the plaster cast was gone and replaced with one of those black soft-casts – the orthopedic type with Velcro. “They gave me some extra CalciFi and cut me out of that brick the hospital put me in. I have to take another dose tonight, but I should be able to fit back into my gauntlets tomorrow.”

“Congrats,” Melinda smiled tightly.

“So, I guess I can clear out my stuff and get out of your hair tonight.” Quake was speaking carefully now. Her emotions were better guarded than they had been yesterday, so Melinda had to stretch her senses outward to finally get a glimpse of what Quake was feeling. Reluctance, maybe. Some kind of hesitation.

Melinda would be lying if she said she didn’t feel her heart drop a notch at the idea of Quake heading back out to her crummy apartment, back into SHIELD’s fold before Melinda had a chance to fully gauge what was going on inside their ranks. She would never admit it, but she felt a sort of responsibility for the kid. Like maybe this was her chance to try and balance the scales for the sins of her past.

“If you want to,” Melinda finally said, just as carefully as Quake. “I usually order pizza on Fridays, and I can never finish the whole thing myself. So if you wanted to stay and help me eat it…” She left the rest of the invitation unspoken, hoping that by not coming outright and offering, it would be easier for Quake to say yes.

It worked.

“Oh, well, I mean… if it would help out,” Quake shrugged. “I am a hero, after all. Helping people is kind of my thing.”

“That would be good,” nodded Melinda. “Besides, it’s too late to be moving all your stuff tonight. What do you like on your pizza?”

Chapter End Notes

Our picture of Melinda's past broadens and our concern for Daisy deepens... Thank you all so much for reading and sharing cyberspace with me! <3

Chapter 5: An Unguarded Glimpse

Chapter Notes

TW for descriptions of pain

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They had a good time that night, sharing the greasy pepperoni and banana pepper pizza that Quake had picked. They chatted a little while they ate and discovered that they both enjoyed the somewhat campy, old sci-fi TV show “Expedition: Space.” Quake had called it ‘vintage’ and laughed good-naturedly when Melinda confessed she had first watched it as a child, when it originally aired, and Melinda had teased Quake when she admitted to dressing up in a homemade SpaceFleet uniform for Halloween in her younger days, drawing a badge on the front of a yellow sweatshirt with a permanent marker.

“My foster parents were pissed that I ‘ruined’ a perfectly good sweatshirt, but I feel like I improved it,” Quake grinned. “Honestly, I wish I still had that sweatshirt.”

“Foster parents?” Melinda asked.

“Yeah, one set of many,” Quake said off-handedly. “The Pattersons. They weren’t too bad, all things considered, but I didn’t last long there.”

“How long were you in foster care?” Melinda wanted to know. She tried to ask casually, hoping that Quake wouldn’t mind sharing the highly personal information. She genuinely wanted to know – it was kind of nice getting to know the kid – but there was also a part of her that immediately began wondering if SHIELD had taken to recruiting foster kids.

“My whole life.” Quake shifted a little, turning her gaze toward the windows and studying the night skyline. “My mother had to give me up when I was a baby. She left me a letter explaining that she loved me but couldn’t take care of me, yada yada. She hoped I’d get adopted, but things didn’t really work out that way.”

“So, your parents, who kicked you out two years ago for being Enhanced…?”

“Foster parents, yeah. The Brodys. I had been there for a while. I

thought it might have been the one that stuck – that's why I tried so hard to hide my powers – but obviously that's not quite what happened."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Quake said quickly. "Things worked out. I get to be a superhero, now. Every kid's dream, right?"

"Right."

"I'm kind of tired," Quake said after some silence had passed between them. "Long day, and taking CalciFi always wears me out. Hard work repairing your own bones, you know?"

"Of course." Melinda stood and began clearing the plates away. "Make sure you put some ice on your nose. And I have some tiger balm if you want it. I can leave it in the bathroom for you."

"Thanks. See you in the morning."

Melinda hummed her agreement, and Quake disappeared into her room with an ice pack from the freezer.

Once Melinda had finished cleaning up the kitchen, she drifted back into her office. It was on the edge of getting late, but she was expecting the files from the ATCU tonight, and she wanted to review them as soon as possible, in case the job was time sensitive.

When she powered on her computer system, screen panels popping out of the wall and keyboard flipping out of the desktop, there was a file drop from Banks waiting for her. She started to scan through the briefing, massaging her knee absent-mindedly as she read.

Ros wanted someone to infiltrate the central offices of Cybertek, a weapons and tech developer that often sold its gear into the hands of the highest bidders, and track down information on their buyers and their shareholders. Ros's files explained that the ATCU was investigating Cybertek, trying to determine which deep pockets were funding their R&D and who benefited from Cybertek's lack of pickiness when it came to clientele.

'*Discretion is paramount,'* the files read. '*Cybertek cannot know they are being investigated, nor can their benefactors. Cybertek is not the ultimate target, just the middleman. Tipping them off in any capacity will compromise the larger investigation.'*

Melinda poured over the files for the next hour, studying the building layout, mapping possible points of entry and exit, picking through information that might help her gain access to the Cybertek computer system or financial records once inside. It would be a complicated job, to be sure, but not anything she couldn't handle without the proper preparation. She felt sure that she would be able to pull it off before the week was over.

She was so deeply focused on the files that she almost didn't hear the faint groan that came from somewhere on the other side of the office door. It was quiet, but enough of a departure from her normally silent apartment that her ears caught it. Then her senses were flooded with an overwhelming surge of pain, and she almost doubled over at her desk.

Breathing deeply through the feeling, Melinda forced herself to stand, and she quickly moved through the apartment until she found the source of the pain that was radiating over her. Quake's door.

Melinda paused for just a moment, listening at the closed door. She heard another groan, louder now that she was close by, and another wave of pain rolled out from behind the door. Her knees nearly buckled, but she stayed upright until the wave passed.

Throwing caution to the wind and not thinking much about the kid's privacy, Melinda shouldered the door open and immediately scanned the room for threats. No one was there. Just a huddled lump under a blanket on the bed, moving in time with the sound of labored breathing that now filled Melinda's ears.

"Hey," Melinda said softly. She reached out to give Quake's shoulder a shake and immediately regretted it as the feeling of pain that was emanating from the kid intensified with her touch. It felt like all of Melinda's insides were on fire. Her bones felt sharp and hot inside her body, like super-heated shards of jagged metal or glass tearing at her from the inside out, and the muscles in her stomach cramped fiercely.

"Jesus, kid. Hey… Daisy. Daisy?" Melinda had removed her hand as fast as she could, but she needed to get Quake's attention. Needed to make sure she was okay.

Slowly, the lump shifted as Quake rolled over, pushing the blanket away and blinking thickly up at Melinda. She was taking deep breaths, a sickly sheen of sweat glistened on her forehead, and she wore a grimace on her face, but she didn't seem as close to the brink of

collapse as Melinda felt.

“What are you—?"

“What’s going on?” Melinda asked, trying to catch her own breath after the onslaught of feeling she’d picked up from Quake. “What’s wrong?”

“What do you mean?” Quake asked defensively. Melinda watched as Quake very intentionally arranged her face to mask any discomfort, swiped away the traces of pain from her eyes, and forced herself to sit upright. She could feel how much effort it took.

“You’re hurt.”

“Sorry,” Quake said immediately, looking embarrassed. “I was trying to keep quiet, but I’m not used to anyone being around, I guess. I’m fine. Sorry for waking you up.”

“You didn’t wake me up,” Melinda told her. “And you’re not fine, I can feel… tell. Something’s wrong.”

“It’s just the CalciFi,” Quake shook her head. “It doesn’t have the most comfortable side effects. It’s kind of like… did you ever get growing pains as a kid? It’s kind of like that, maybe a little worse, and sort of crampy, too.”

“Bullshit,” Melinda said without thinking. “It feels worse than Kree torture.”

Quake narrowed her eyes and cocked her head to one side. “How would you know?”

Before Melinda could come up with an answer, Quake winced and folded in on herself slightly, letting out a little hiss and sending a fresh blast of agony Melinda’s way. Melinda had to reach out and grab the bedpost to steady herself.

“Holy shit,” Quake said. “You can feel it? What… how…?”

“My powers,” Melinda explained through gritted teeth. “Empath.”

“You never mentioned that before.”

“Never came up.” Melinda straightened up as the pain lapped away. “Not as obvious as super strength, but pretty useful from time to time.”

“No kidding.”

“How can you stand this?” asked Melinda. “I’ve put up with a lot of pain, but this…”

“You just get used to it,” Quake shrugged. “I guess your pain threshold just changes, eventually. And it beats having the bones in my arms shatter apart any time I use my powers.”

“Still… this is excruciating. Isn’t there anything that helps?”

“I’m not supposed to take any other medicines while the CalciFi is working,” Quake shook her head. She looked like she was about to say something else, but thought better of it. Melinda felt her embarrassment blurring at the edge of her consciousness.

“What? There’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“Jesus, you really are an empath.” The embarrassment intensified.

“Are you going to tell me what helps or not?”

“It’s stupid,” Quake muttered.

Melinda rolled her eyes. “Being in this much pain is stupid, especially if we can ease it.”

“Pressure,” Quake finally admitted. “Pressure helps. That’s why I was all curled up. That’s usually the best I can do when I’m by myself.”

Melinda thought for a minute before motioning toward Quake and asking, “May I?”

Quake hesitated, then nodded. She wriggled over to one side of the bed to make room for Melinda, who climbed in somewhat awkwardly.

It took some maneuvering, but soon Melinda had wrapped her arms around Quake, trying to spread out the contact points across Quake’s arms and back as best she could. Melinda had never been much of a hugger, but she squeezed gently, and she could feel the tension start to slip from Quake’s muscles almost right away.

Her own body was barraged with Quake’s pain at the touch, but this time it wasn’t as acute as it had been before, and the powerful rush of relief that she could sense coming from the kid was enough to convince her it was worth enduring the extra discomfort.

“Oh my god,” Quake breathed, letting out a sound that was half sigh and half sob. Out of the corner of her eye, Melinda could see tears gathering in Quake’s eyes. Eventually, a few slid down her face as she grew more and more relaxed. “That feels so much better.”

“Good, I’m glad.”

“Super strength, super pressure,” Quake mumbled. Her words were slurred slightly, and Melinda could tell that her exhausted body was finally succumbing to the sleep it needed to heal but hadn’t been able to reach when she had been hurting so badly.

Quake slipped away into sleep soon after, and Melinda sat there in the bed, happy she had been able to help, but trying desperately not to think about the last time she had cradled a hurting hero in her arms until she, too, finally fell into a fitful sleep.

It was early when Melinda woke the next morning, watery grey dawn light streaming through the gap in the curtains. Quake was still in her arms, curled somewhat into her side and nestled there like one of those viral videos where the puppy ends up befriending the grizzly bear or something equally ridiculous and saccharine. Melinda could feel that her pain had dimmed to a dull ache, more like sore muscles than last night’s searing agony, so she didn’t feel too badly about easing herself gingerly out of bed and leaving Quake alone for a few more hours of sleep.

Melinda ran through an abbreviated tai chi session, showered, and changed into fresh clothes, which felt especially good since she had slept in her clothes from the day before. Her neck was stiff as she moved through her morning routine, not particularly happy about the odd angle in which she had held it through night, but the hot steam of the shower and a couple of aspirin helped enough.

It wasn’t too much longer before Quake emerged from her room, dressed again in her tac suit and boots, this time with both gauntlets strapped over her arms. Her lip looked better, just a small cut that had scabbed over, and the bruising had softened on her nose, although it still looked quite tender. She seemed otherwise normal, though, like she wasn’t in pain at all and like the previous night had never happened. In the interest of sparing them both from the embarrassment of talking about their shared vulnerability last night, Melinda followed suit and acted like nothing was different.

“SHIELD again, today?”

“Well, it’s kind of my job,” Quake cracked, a lopsided little grin spreading across her face. “I’d be in hot water if I didn’t show up. At least today’s briefing isn’t so early.”

“What about school?” Melinda asked. “Surely you don’t go to SHIELD every single day…”

Quake frowned. “Look, I didn’t exactly spell it out yesterday, but I guess I will now. School’s not really my thing. Never was. So when I started over and started working for SHIELD, I just sort of… stopped going.”

“You’re a dropout?”

“I guess, if you want to get technical about it,” Quake grumbled. “SHIELD thinks I’m an adult. I can’t exactly be running off to algebra in the middle of a mission.”

“Didn’t anyone ever tell you how important it is to have a high school diploma?”

“According to my records, I do have one,” Quake shrugged, a little more proud of herself than Melinda would have liked.

Melinda pinched the bridge of her nose. “It’s not just about… you know what, never mind. It’s none of my business.”

“No, it’s not.”

“I just want you to have something to solid to fall back on if—”

“If what, I wash out of SHIELD?” Quake asked, anger crackling just under the surface.

“No, that’s not what I…” Melinda let out a frustrated huff. She didn’t know how this had turned into an argument. Was that some secret superpower that teenagers possessed? Were they falling back into their familiar roles as adversaries? Was it just because she was so out of practice when it came to social interaction? “I’m not trying to argue with you.”

Quake was quiet for minute, chastened by Melinda’s retreat. “I’m not either.”

“Maybe now isn’t the best time for this conversation,” Melinda suggested. “It’s early, we’re both trying to get to work. Neither one of

us got a good night's sleep last night…"

Quake looked sheepish and immediately turned her eyes downward, fiddling with a clasp on her gauntlet. "Sorry about that. It won't happen again."

"Nothing to be sorry about," Melinda said simply. "You needed help, I was able to do something. I was happy to do it."

"Not very villainous of you."

"Maybe I just like to keep you on your toes," Melinda smirked. That got a laugh out of Quake.

"I should go. There's this new villain, a big one that's SHIELD's been tracking for months, and I think our team might be close to a break in the case. I can't miss briefing."

"Of course," Melinda nodded. "Do you need a ride?"

"No, I've got time for the train today. Thanks, though."

Quake bustled around for a moment more, throwing her sweatshirt on over the tac suit again, grabbing a banana off the counter. She paused briefly in front of the elevator door and turned back to look at Melinda.

"Hey, June?"

"Hmm?"

"I, um…" Quake's face flushed, and she shifted her weight back and forth, clearly wrestling with whether or not to say what was on her mind. "Well, it's just… you said neither one of us got good sleep, but I thought you should know… I slept better last night than I have in… in a long time. So I wanted to say thanks, I guess."

Melinda blinked, more than a little surprised, before forcing her mouth open to speak. "You're welcome, Daisy."

Even more surprising? Was just how much she meant it.

Chapter End Notes

A little shorter this time, but a big development in Melinda and Daisy's relationship! I hope you all liked seeing this (slightly) different side to the both of them :)

<3

Chapter 6: An Unmitigated Disaster

Chapter Notes

> TW for depiction of violence (context: hero fight) and death of minor/unnamed characters (nongraphic, canon-typical, specifically s3)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Melinda spent most of her day sitting outside of the building that housed Cybertek's central offices, conducting surveillance and casing the place for her eventual infiltration. The schematics in her file from the ATCU seemed to be up-to-date, as everything matched up with the recon Melinda gathered herself – entrances, cameras, and security guard schedules all exactly as Ros had indicated they would be.

By the time afternoon rolled around, she was ready to move inside, and after donning a passable disguise, she swept into the building and past the security checkpoint at the front entrance, making careful mental notes about the camera placement, metal detectors, and obvious-to-her pressure plate in the floor of the building foyer.

"Nature of your visit to Cybertek today, ma'am?" asked the guard at the front desk as he checked her ID and badge, which identified her as Heidi Martin, from the office of the Metro City Department of Employment and Labor.

"I'm here for your quarterly workplace conditions inspection," Melinda lied easily. "The city recently mandated that at least one of the quarterly inspections be conducted unannounced, so no one is expecting me. It's a pop-up visit, you know?"

"Is this like an OSHA thing?" The guard scratched at his stubbly chin. "'Cause we don't do any of the manufacturing here. This is just corporate."

"Not OSHA, no," Melinda shook her head and resisted the impulse to correct him on what OSHA actually did. "MCDEL. We're local, not national, and interested in the non-tangible working conditions within the office. Corporate culture, health benefits, that sort of thing."

"Sure, sure," the guard nodded. Melinda could easily feel that he didn't really have much of a clue what she was talking about but didn't want to look stupid in front of her. The power of unabashed

confidence and a simple, bullshit story. “I’ll buzz you up, but I’m gonna have to let reception know you’re coming.”

“That will be fine,” she said, flashing him a plastic smile. “Thank you. And if you have any complaints about the way you’re treated here at work, don’t hesitate to reach out to our office.”

She passed him a fake business card with the MCDEL contact information on it. As expected, the guard took it, getting his fingerprints all over it, and tucked it into a basket on the desk filled with all sorts of other business cards, all easily forgotten.

It was easy to work her way through the building once she’d shared her same cover story with the woman in reception. The woman was happy to escort her around to the different wings and floors, pointing out all of the special features that made Cybertek ‘a great place to work.’

The receptionist proudly showed off the office safety features, the emergency exits, and all the places where employees could get coffee and snacks. Most of the Cybertek offices were lined with glass instead of walls, so Melinda had no trouble studying the building’s interior while pretending to be impressed by the selection of muffins the receptionist highlighted in the fourth-floor vending machine.

“And I think that’s everything,” the receptionist announced after nearly half an hour of tour guiding. “The only thing we haven’t covered is the executive suite, but that’s just where Mr. Quinn works and holds his meetings. Most of us employees don’t spend much time back there.”

“That’s the suite back that way?” Melinda asked, nodding toward the one hallway they hadn’t covered.

“Mm-hm,” the receptionist nodded. “Mr. Quinn isn’t in today, otherwise I’d see if he had a moment to meet with you.”

“That’s all right,” Melinda said quickly. “We tend to schedule our sit-down meetings with the executives rather than pop in unannounced. Their schedules are so busy…”

“Oh, don’t I know it,” tittered the receptionist. “Always on the move, Mr. Quinn. Clients to meet, shareholders to keep happy, benefits to throw…”

“Never a dull moment,” hummed Melinda as she scanned her eyes

along the ceiling line of the hallway that led to Quinn's office. Two cameras. A biometric lock on the office door. "Well, thanks for your time today, Jill. You'll be sure to share my office's contact information among your colleagues? If there's anything they want to report?"

"I will," she nodded again. Then, with a wink, "But I don't think anyone will have anything negative to say."

"Probably not," Melinda agreed, oozing false sincerity. "Thank you again. Have a nice day."

"You too!"

As soon as she had made it back out to her car (a black crossover SUV this time, rather than June's Civic), Melinda added her own notes and observations to the Cybertek file, so as not to lose any of the information she'd gathered. She'd study up and maybe, if everything fell into place the way she hoped it would, she could take a stab at breaking in after-hours tonight.

She began the drive back to her apartment then, easing out into the late afternoon traffic. As she waited for an opportunity to merge, a series of police cars raced past her in the opposite direction, sirens bawling and lights flashing. Intrigued, Melinda fiddled quickly with the dial on the car radio and activated the hidden receiver that allowed her to tune into the police scanner.

A dispatch voice crackled to life and filled the car: "All available units respond to Union Square, we have an 0-8-4, Enhanced Incident. SHIELD is on scene and requesting backup for crowd control."

Without really thinking, Melinda swung the car around in a smooth U-turn, much to the irritation of the drivers behind her, and changed course for Union Square. It was probably stupid of her to head towards an active SHIELD scene, but she was curious what might be going on, and equally curious to know if Quake's team was the one responding.

For years, she had made it a point to avoid SHIELD ops as much as possible, not counting the ones where SHIELD sent someone after her, of course. It was better if she didn't have to see them or think about them any more than absolutely necessary. But now that she was actively looking into the way SHIELD ran things, and actively interested in one of its more promising rookies, she couldn't help but wonder what she might find at the scene.

She was about a block away from Union Square when she met a police barricade preventing her from driving further, so she pulled off and parked in a deserted alley and approached the rest of the way on foot, slipping through the throngs of panicked people being herded away by pushy cops. What she saw once she cleared the corner nearly stopped her in her tracks.

There was a small SHIELD team – four heroes, all in costume, including Quake – facing off against a 7-foot-tall figure in a floor-length black garment. Maybe a robe, or one of those duster coats… it was hard to say for sure. The jarring thing about the figure, however, wasn't its clothes, but its face.

It was certainly not humanoid, and probably not earthly, either. Greyish-purple skin, large, deep-set red eyes, no nose to speak of, and what had to be at least a dozen curling, shoulder-length tentacles protruding from the back of its head. It gave off an aura of evil so ancient and strong that you wouldn't have needed empath powers to feel your stomach curdle with fear at the sight.

"Hey, get back!" ordered a scowling police officer nearby. He put a rough hand on Melinda's shoulder and steered her back behind a barricade where a crowd of bystanders had gathered, trying to snap pictures and videos of the encounter. "No civilians past this point, lady."

If Melinda hadn't been in her stupid government worker disguise, complete with fake glasses, pencil skirt, and wretched high heels, she might have grabbed the jackass' arm and judo-flipped him into the concrete, but as it was, she thought it would be best not to blow her cover in front of an entire array of cameras. She settled for giving the officer her best glare before stepping primly around the barrier and melting into the crowd to watch. She would only intervene if absolutely necessary, she told herself.

The SHIELD team was clearly made up of rookie heroes, and Quake seemed to be the one in command, whether by rank or by simple virtue of the fact that all the others kept looking to her for direction. There was a teleporter, a lady covered in spikes, and a guy who clearly saw himself as an Iron-Man wannabe, with booster boots, an anti-gravity belt, and energy blasters strapped to his hands. Not exactly the crack team Melinda would have chosen to go toe-to-toe with a new, probably alien, villain-level threat.

Quake looked good, though, despite the lopsided odds. She appeared

calm and in control of herself and the rest of her team. Her Quake costume had always been a well-designed one: sleek, black tac suit with purple piping, decked out with a utility belt, sturdy boots, and gleaming gauntlets. The cowl around her shoulders and mask over her face concealed her identity well, and the armor and padding on her suit and lifts in her boots helped make her look older, more like an adult agent than a kid thrown into the deep end without water wings. Her posture was strong, her motions confident, and the late afternoon sunlight gave her a heroic glow. For a moment, Melinda could clearly see the hero Quake would grow into in a few years' time – a force of nature and a damn good agent. Avengers-level, even.

The same could not be said for her teammates. The teleporter was jumpy, never content to stay in the same spot for more than a second, and the booster-boot-boy seemed like a loose cannon, taking risky moves when they weren't fully needed. Spike-woman seemed more in control, but it was obvious that she wasn't fully comfortable with hand-to-hand combat yet. Still, Quake directed them with reasonable skill, and it was clear that they were at least somewhat used to working as a unit.

They had backed the alien into the center of the square, the big, artsy sculpture meant to be an abstract representation of 'unity' at its back and preventing it from turning tail. The teleporter popped in and out, buzzing around the alien's head and serving as both annoyance and distraction, and booster-boot-boy had circled around the back of the sculpture to keep the escape route closed. Spike-woman and Quake handled the front offensive, forcing the alien into semi-retreat.

"Last chance," Melinda heard Quake call towards the alien. "SHIELD's taking you in for questioning. You can come easy, or we can play hardball."

The alien's face twisted into what Melinda could only describe as a gruesome kind of grin. If it spoke, she couldn't hear what it said, but she got the message loud and clear. The alien was daring them to bring it on.

Before anyone had the chance to react, the alien flicked one arm out to the side, sending a wave of grey mist rushing toward booster-boot-boy. The mist swirled around him until it had all but enveloped him, and Melinda watched in horror as the mist slowly changed from grey to red and the color drained from booster-boy's face. His body went limp and crashed to the ground, his skin paper white and his face hollowing before their eyes as the mist seemed to leech the life from

his body.

Several screams rose up from the gathered crowd, and people began pushing, trying to distance themselves. Melinda pushed in the other direction, determined to stay close to the front.

Quake called out to her teammates, but Melinda couldn't hear what she said. Quake turned a forceful blast of seismic energy on the alien, forcing it backwards until its back was pinned against the metal of the Unity sculpture. Quake advanced, deadly fire crackling in her eyes, the force of her quake still trained on the alien. The muscles in her arm tightened and the intensity of her quake increased as she descended upon the alien. She forced it down to its knees with the power of her quake and gave a jerk of her head, indicating for spike-woman to come and handcuff the alien.

Before spike-woman could make a move, however, the red mist seeped its way over from booster-boy and began to envelope spike-woman, who cried out in pain.

Quake didn't hesitate this time, and she used one hand to blast spike-woman, forcing her thirty yards away, skidding across the pavement. It probably hurt, but it got the woman away from the mist long enough that she wasn't consumed in the same way her teammate had been.

The distraction was enough to give the alien time to get back to its feet and call the mist back to it. The mist appeared to strengthen the alien as it reabsorbed back into its body – something that Quake noticed, too. Quake scrambled backwards, out of the alien's reach, and called out to the teleporter to do the same.

The teleporter must not have heard her, because he was still popping too close to the alien's head for anyone's comfort, trying to stick it with what looked like a tranq needle. Melinda felt like the world was moving in slow motion as she watched the teleporter disappear from view, then reappear, right in the outstretched and waiting hand of the alien. The alien's hand closed into a fist around the teleporter's neck, and the grey mist swirled around them both, turning red before anyone could do anything. The teleporter writhed only for a moment, before going limp, too.

Quake let out a strangled yell and let loose a quake blast so forceful that the ground under Melinda's feet trembled. The quake slammed into the alien, forcing it to release the teleporter and sending it

skidding backwards. Quake began sprinting toward it – stupid, reckless, heroic kid, Melinda cursed – and Melinda began kicking off her high heels.

Melinda had just vaulted over the barricade, a rip tearing up the side of her pencil skirt, determined to stop Quake from going and getting herself vaporized, when the alien surprised them both.

Before either one of them had gotten close enough to do anything, the alien dissolved completely into a cloud of the same mist, essentially vanishing before their eyes. The new cloud of mist churned across the square and disappeared down a sewer grate. Melinda stopped running, but Quake didn't. Quake charged over the grate and dropped to her knees, yanking at the bars but having no luck in budging them.

Melinda could hear Quake shouting at the grate, her voice ragged. "No! Come back here! Come back, damn it!"

The crowds were starting to push back in, the agitated buzz of gobsmacked bystanders conversing between themselves burrowing into Melinda's ears and senses. She was drawing too much attention, shoeless and in a ripped skirt on the wrong side of the barricade. She slunk backwards, fading seamlessly back into the crowd. There wasn't anything she could do now, and it wouldn't do her or Quake any good if they were seen together like this.

The last thing Melinda saw, before SHIELD trucks and a MediChopper all rolled in and began clearing the scene, was Quake stumbling away from the grate and back over to her fallen teammates, checking fruitlessly at their necks for a pulse or sign of life.

Quake's mask covered a lot, but it didn't hide the anguish on her face.

Poor kid.

Chapter End Notes

> Hello friends! I am so so sorry this chapter is coming up so late - we had a bit of a family emergency last week, and while everything is fine now, I've been rather distracted the past several days. Fingers crossed that we're back to smooth sailing :)
>
> A bit shorter this time, and definitely a troubling turn for our favorite hero and villain...

Chapter 7: An Uncontrolled Interruption

Chapter Notes

TW for fighting/violence (canon-typical, mostly hand-to-hand)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Melinda returned to her apartment on autopilot, barely thinking about what she was doing as she steered the car back across town and rode the elevator in numb silence. What she *was* thinking about was the battle with the alien in the street, and what she was thinking had her rattled.

It had been years since SHIELD – since anyone – had seen an alien threat as deadly as what they had encountered today. That on its own was enough to be unnerving. The life-sucking mist and overpowering ease with which the alien had picked the heroes off was enough to keep anyone up with nightmares for the rest of their life. The way it had just retreated, like it was tired of playing with its prey for the day and was off to find something more fun to do, was unsettling, too. But what had Melinda the most shaken wasn't either of those things. It wasn't even the alien itself. No, what had her feeling like the ground was falling out from under her feet was the way SHIELD had handled the situation.

Sending four young, inexperienced heroes to go and assess a completely unknown threat, with no backup or extraction plan… And there obviously hadn't been any order given for them to retreat after the first one went down and it became clear they were dealing with something far beyond their ability. Quake had an SO, and presumably did all of the other members of her team, so where was he? Why had those heroes been left to fend for themselves for so long? Why had they been practically left for dead?

Melinda felt sick as she changed out of her torn skirt and ripped nylons and into something more comfortable. She couldn't get the sound of Quake's anguished cries at the grate or the crumpled, broken look on her face as she'd bent over her teammate's body out of her head. She felt like she knew the kid well enough to know that Quake wouldn't just feel the loss deeply, she'd take it personally. She'd feel responsible. Melinda knew how that feeling could eat you up from the inside out.

Her hands shook slightly as she wadded up the ruined clothes and tossed them away. The image of Quake kneeling over her teammate blurred together with another image that had been swimming in Melinda's mind for fifteen years, albeit more sharply these past few days. Dark hair. Pale face. Red, red hands. And guilt. So much guilt.

She sat in front of the windows in the living room, watching the sun set over the city but making no moves to turn on a light. The sun turned a vibrant crimson color as it sank behind the skyscrapers, and Melinda had to squeeze her eyes shut against the memories that tapped at her skull with all the sensitivity of an ice pick.

Hours passed, and Melinda waited. She wasn't sure how long Quake would be in debrief, but she figured it would be good for the kid to have someone waiting up for her when she came home. Someone to understand. But the sky faded from red to purple to black, and Quake never appeared.

Maybe SHIELD kept her for overnight observation, Melinda considered. Maybe they were quarantining her to make sure whatever it was that alien could do hadn't infected anyone. Maybe Quake wasn't ever going to come back here. Maybe she would just pack up and run, start over once more.

Melinda gave herself a shake. No. Disappearing was her move, not Quake's. And besides, the kid would never take off without her stuff. The laptop, the hula dancer, and the elephant all still sat in the guest room, waiting for Quake's return the same way Melinda was.

They didn't all need to wait.

Melinda stood then and moved into her office, new resolve pumping action into her body. It was silly to sit around doing nothing. Quake would come back when she was ready, and Melinda was wasting time. She had things she'd meant to accomplish tonight, and everything she knew about Ros told her that the ATCU would be buzzing with activity after that alien showed up today. They'd appreciate expediency on Melinda's part – one less thing to worry about right now, when there was clearly something much more pressing taking the ATCU's agents' time and energy. And besides, she'd already put her plan in motion that afternoon. If she waited now, she'd have to start over, probably have to wait another week to avoid suspicion.

She scanned her handprint on the hidden panel in the wall of her office to reveal her collection of suits and gadgets, and began to gear

up.

Breaking into Cybertek was so easy, Melinda would have laughed if she hadn't been operating in silence. Her refraction cape cloaked her from the motion sensors as she jimmied open the emergency exit with the loose screw in the handle that she'd clocked earlier that day, and the business card with the security guard's fingerprints was sitting exactly where he'd left it. A simple scan from the replicator she'd brought gave her a perfect match on a SteriSheet that she slipped over her own, gloved finger. From there, it was easy to scan into the system with his credentials and reroute the cameras to run a playback loop, recording over tonight's footage with footage from the night before.

Just as Ros had indicated in her files, there was no night watchman working in the building – Cybertek was confident enough in their state-of-the-art security system that they had eliminated the human element years ago. Fine by Melinda, it meant the job was just that much easier, and she wouldn't have to knock anybody out, which her joints always appreciated.

Thanks to her guided tour from the afternoon, she had no trouble making her way up to the executive suite. Unfortunately, the security guard's fingerprint didn't unlock the door to the CEO's office, so Melinda had to resort to plan B. Pulling a small electric drill from her belt, she set to work unscrewing the hinges to the door. This would set back her timeline somewhat, but she wasn't too worried. She always gave herself extra time in case she ran into setbacks like this.

Eventually, she detached the large glass door from its frame. It was heavier than it looked, and she nearly dropped the whole damn thing when she lowered it to the floor. Thank god for super strength and good reflexes. She crossed quickly to Quinn's desk and booted up his computer.

This was the tricky part. Melinda knew enough to get the job done most of the time, but tech had never been her area of expertise. Luckily, there were enough gadgets and doohickeys on the market these days that it didn't require her to be a master hacker to get what she needed out of a computer, but this part of the job was always the one she had the least amount of confidence in.

She fed the decryption device into the machine first, let it run whatever algorithm it used to pinpoint Quinn's password and unlock the computer for her. She kept an eye on her watch, counting the

precious seconds that the device used before it struck gold. She was going to be cutting this one close.

The device flashed green and the computer pinged. Melinda unplugged the decryptor and switched it out for the seek-and-store tool she'd picked up (okay, stolen) from Stark ages ago – a handy little thing she called the Fishing Net. It was designed to track down, copy, and store any files that met whatever set of parameters she told it to look for. She tapped away at the screen for a moment, setting the Fishing Net to seek out any and all financial documents, shipping orders, funding streams, and production chains.

The Fishing Net was a fast tool, but the process was still a slow one, as the device sifted through what were potentially terabytes of company data, searching for what Melinda wanted. Hoping to occupy herself while she waited, Melinda began combing through the rest of the office. She wanted to get a better sense of who Ian Quinn, CEO, was, and what might make him tick. She also wouldn't say no to some hard copies of anything useful – a ledger book, incriminating memos, something like that.

Most of the office was clean, sleek, and minimalist, lots of glass and smooth lines. The desk had no papers sitting on it, and the drawers – which were easy to pick open – were filled mostly with useless stuff. One had magazines and newspaper clippings of articles spotlighting the company's success or lionizing its brilliant, philanthropic billionaire-CEO, so she could apparently strike 'humble' from her list of adjectives to describe Quinn. Another drawer had a bottle of scotch and a couple of glasses inside it. Gross.

She moved on to the bookcase, sliding her finger across the spines of the books. A lot of them seemed mainly decorative, titles brimming with buzzwords about business success, but a few stuck out – *Atlas Shrugged* (typical), Machiavelli's *The Prince* (also typical), *1984, Heart of Darkness,* and, perhaps most unusually, a textbook titled *Standards of Physical Science, Grade 8*.

Melinda pulled out the textbook and began rifling through the pages. There were handwritten notes in the margins, conversations between two children that had clearly been written years and years ago. The cracked spine fell open to a page near the back, which listed important physicists and their discoveries. At the bottom of the list, the two different handwritings had penned in "Ian Quinn and Franklin Hall – Princes of physics and future Nobel Prize winners!"

Something tickled at the back of brain at the names, but Melinda couldn't place it, so she reshelved the book and, motivated by the phrase "princes of physics," pulled out *The Prince* instead. The book itself was thin, but it felt oddly bulky in her hand. When she flipped this one open, she found several loose sheets of paper folded up and tucked inside. She spread the pages out and felt her stomach drop.

One held schematics for an exosuit that bore a striking resemblance to the one SHIELD had modeled in their Deathlok project. Another held a chemical formula that she recognized from her days in EnReD – a model for a stabilized Extremis formula. A third showed designs for something that Melinda didn't recognize, but that looked suspiciously like a very large weapon.

Folding the pages back up, she stuck them in a pocket on her suit and tried to keep her heart and her mind from racing. Why did Quinn have SHIELD tech designs squirrelled away in his office? Was he ex-SHIELD and she didn't realize, or was there a leak at SHIELD?

She reshelved the book and crossed back over to the computer. The readout on the Fishing Net indicated it was nearly finished with its search, thankfully. She couldn't wait to get out of here.

Just as the Fishing Net beeped its completion and she pulled the device out of the computer, a voice from the doorway made her nearly jump out of her skin.

"So are you going to hand that over to me, or am I going to have to take it?"

Melinda looked up and saw Quake leaning in the doorway, in the empty space where the door Melinda had removed should have sat. She was still suited up in her hero costume, but there was a definite droop to her shoulders, and she didn't have the cocky swagger Melinda was used to seeing when she normally encountered Quake in situations like these. Not surprising, after the afternoon the kid had.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Could ask you the same thing," Quake volleyed easily. "Because to me it looks like you're taking something that doesn't belong to you."

"I didn't know SHIELD was interested in protecting Cybertek assets," Melinda said. "Didn't think SHIELD had any business with Cybertek."

"We have business with stopping villains from stealing information

from weapons and tech developers," said Quake stiffly. "Who knows who you might sell that data to? What kind of tech might end up in the wrong hands because of it. Who might die because of it." Her voice cracked slightly on her last sentence, and Melinda swallowed hard.

"I'm surprised you're still out working tonight… I heard you had a busy day."

"I've got a job to do," was all Quake would say. Her voice was flat, and when Melinda reached out with her powers to try and get a sense of Quake's feelings, she was met with a hard, mental wall. Quake was locking things up tight.

"Look, I don't really want to fight you—" Quake began.

"Nor do I."

"—but I can't let you walk out of here with whatever that is," she finished. "It'd be easier for both of us if you just gave it to me."

"I can't do that. I have a job to do, too, and I think whatever's on here might be more important than either of us realizes."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"I don't know exactly," Melinda admitted. "But something's off about this place. I'm hoping my employer can shed some light on the situation."

"I don't suppose you'd be willing to tell me who that is…"

"Afraid not."

They were both quiet for a tense moment. Quake looked around the office, a faraway look in her eyes, and gave a little shudder. "I hate this place. Can we speed this up? The less time I spend at Cybertek, the better."

"What do you propose?" Melinda asked, tilting her head to one side. Surreptitiously, she slid the Fishing Net into her hip pocket. Quake was too distracted looking around the room to notice. "Rock-paper-scissors?"

"Ha ha. The usual, I guess. If you won't make it easy on us."

Another pregnant silence fell between them, neither one really

wanting to make the first move, but neither one able to just give in, either.

“All right, then,” Melinda finally sighed. She reached behind her and placed a hand on the hilt of her sword. “Count of three?”

“Three.”

In one fluid motion, Melinda unsheathed her sword and swung it in a smooth arc, holding it at the ready. At the same time, Quake sent a little ripple at Melinda’s feet, shaking her balance.

“Don’t tell me you’re going easy on me,” Melinda smirked, before she could really think about what she was saying. Something about combat messed with her filter.

“I’m not going easy,” Quake frowned.

“I could make waves bigger than that by stomping my foot. If you want to stop me, then go ahead and stop me. Otherwise, you might as well just let me walk.”

“You’re not trying either. You haven’t taken a single swing yet,” retorted Quake. “It’s weird, okay?”

“I know.”

Quake winced briefly, put a finger to her ear. She dug around for a minute, then extracted her comm and crushed it under her boot. “Stupid handler is yelling at me to hurry up.”

Resigned to the fact that there wasn’t going to be a good way to handle this, Melinda gritted her teeth and tucked into a roll, popping up in front of Quake and ready to grapple for position. If she could just get to the other side of the door, she could make a run for it and get out of here without having to fight the kid.

Melinda swung the flat of her blade, trying to use it to push Quake out of the way, but Quake was ready for her. She caught Melinda’s wrist and twisted her arm until the sword clattered out of her grasp and to the ground.

Melinda let out an angry huff. She didn’t appreciate being disarmed, and the ease with which Quake had done it pissed her off more than she cared to admit. Using the arm that Quake wasn’t holding, Melinda twisted and swung up with her elbow. She remembered Quake saying

she forgot to cover herself from stray elbows yesterday. Her elbow caught Quake lightly on the jaw – not hard enough to really hurt, more just to catch her by surprise – and Quake let go of her arm. Something flashed dangerously in Quake's eyes, like something had changed.

Melinda used the moment to try and dart out into the hallway, but Quake swept a leg out and tripped her up before she could get anywhere. Melinda rolled as she fell, avoiding a hard collision with the floor, and landed next to the detached glass door, still laying where she'd left it.

"Would you just come on and fight me?" Quake said angrily, taking a step toward her. Her fists were bunched. "Cut out the cat-and-mouse shit and let me do my job!"

"I don't want to hurt you."

"We're supposed to fight!" Quake insisted. She sounded almost desperate. "I'm supposed to fight villains!"

Melinda could feel the situation starting to slip out of her control. Quake was emotional – angry, frustrated, reckless. Melinda wasn't sure she knew how to handle this. She didn't really want to fight Quake, but not fighting her seemed to be making things worse.

"Stand up and fight me," Quake ordered, taking another step toward her.

"We don't have to do this."

"Get up!" Quake snapped. The ground underneath them started to vibrate slightly.

Melinda glared. She didn't like being told what to do under the best of circumstances, and certainly not by a child on the verge of a meltdown. Maybe she needed to show Quake she ought to be careful what she wished for, snap her out of whatever funk she was in. "Fine. You want to fight, let's fight."

Melinda popped up from the ground and cocked her fists. Quake swung first, a right hook that Melinda caught easily, and soon they were trading punches. Melinda was trying to hold back – she genuinely didn't want to hurt the kid, especially after the day she'd had – but Quake seemed to be losing more and more control the longer they fought, and it was getting harder to keep her moves light

when Quake's punches were coming harder.

"Fight back!" Quake cried. "Just hit me, would you?"

Quake was hitting hard and fast, now, real hits that had seismic energy behind them. All Melinda could do at that point was play defense, blocking and dodging as much as she could, and absorbing what she couldn't. She wouldn't have had an opening to try and hit Quake back even if she'd wanted to.

Quake's next swing caught Melinda cleanly on the shoulder with the force of a small earthquake, sending Melinda down to the floor by the glass door for a second time that night, and it was followed by a quick, sharp punch to the side of the head that made Melinda see stars.

That one hurt.

Melinda knew this couldn't go on much longer. Quake was red in the face, expression twisted with fury and desperation, totally out of control as she kept swinging at Melinda on the ground. A sock to the nose, a swift hit to the ribs... Someone was going to get seriously injured if Melinda didn't find some way to stop this.

With a sudden stroke of inspiration, Melinda twisted on the floor and lifted the huge glass door like a shield, hoping to give herself a momentary break from the barrage of Quake's punches and a thin window of time to move away, get her sword back, and get the hell out of there.

Quake was already throwing another punch by the time Melinda had hoisted the door up in front of her, and with a bellow of rage, a blast of energy caught the glass door midair an instant before her fist did. The glass exploded, sending shards spraying in all directions. Melinda curled inward instinctively, flattening to the floor and covering her face to shield it from the flying glass.

The sound of glass raining down on the polished tile of the Cybertek hallway sounded almost musical, but the song was a sour one. There was a thick silence after the sudden cacophony of shattered glass, and Melinda risked a glance up from her defensive position.

Quake stood at the center of the wreckage, glittering slivers of glass caught in her hair and on her suit. She stared down at Melinda, stricken, her face colorless and her eyes wide and rapidly filling with tears.

“Oh my god,” she choked out. “I… I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” Her knees wobbled, then buckled, and she sagged to the floor, hands hanging limply at her sides while her shoulders trembled.

Gingerly, Melinda collected herself and stood, dabbing at the blood streaming from her nose and the cut above her eyebrow. She hesitated for a second, then crossed over to the shell-shocked teenager. She knelt in front of her, glass crunching under her armor, and took Quake by the shoulders.

“It’s okay.”

Those apparently were the magic words, because Quake completely dissolved then, falling into Melinda’s arms and shaking violently as she cried.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

Melinda held on tight, cupping the back of Quake’s head with one hand and rubbing circles on her back with the other. A tidal wave of guilt and grief swelled up out of the girl. It crashed over the top of Melinda’s head and pulled at her stomach with the force of a deadly undertow.

“Let’s go home,” she murmured, easing them both to their feet. Things would be made ten times worse if they got caught here in this mess. Quake clung to her, still crying those jerky, gasping kind of sobs that Melinda associated with people so overwhelmed by emotion that they had a hard time remembering to breathe. “You’ve had a hell of a day. So let’s just get you home, okay?”

Chapter End Notes

> We're (hopefully) back to regular schedule! A bit of a rough night for Melinda and Daisy, though :(Here's hoping they can work some things out together next time.
>
> As always, I can't thank you all enough for continuing to go on this journey with me <3

Chapter 8: An Unraveled Admission

Chapter Notes

> TW for discussion of injuries, blood loss, previous character death, and past GSW

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She covered Quake with her refraction cape as they picked their way back through the building and slipped out the way Melinda had entered. No reason for anyone to see them leaving together and cast suspicion on the poor kid. Melinda had ridden the Storm Cycle over, in case of a need for a quick getaway, and she wondered briefly if Quake was in any condition to ride, but Quake climbed on wordlessly and held on tight like it was the most natural thing in the world. Melinda tried hard not to notice that Quake was still trembling slightly against her.

Melinda wove the bike through the city, back towards the secret entrance to the tunnel that would take them to her apartment unnoticed, and soon they were stepping off the elevator into her living room.

“You should send a message to your handler,” Melinda said quietly. “So they don’t think you’ve gone AWOL. Just let them know that I got away, but that you interrupted me before I took anything, so you don’t take a full loss on your record. Throw in a code 49-19. They should leave you alone tonight if you use that one.”

“‘*Mental or emotional distress, request for personal recovery time,*’” Quake recited numbly as she tapped away at the comm screen in her gauntlet. “How do you know that SHIELD code?”

“I’m the reason they wrote that code.”

Quake looked up, confused, but Melinda didn’t elaborate.

“It doesn’t matter. We just don’t need them trying to track you tonight and finding you here.”

“Yeah.” Quake studied her for a moment longer, maybe trying to parse out any other clues about Melinda’s knowledge of SHIELD codes, but soon her expression twisted like she was going to start crying again and she turned away. “Your face… I’m so sorry.”

Melinda leaned to one side to catch a glimpse of her reflection in the window. She certainly looked worse for wear, between the seismic beatdown and the glass shower, but that didn't really concern her much at the moment. She had stitched herself up from worse.

"Never mind that," she said softly. "It'll heal."

"I didn't… I don't know what…" Quake was crying again for real now, jerky breaths interrupting her words as she tried to explain what had happened between the two of them in the Cybertek offices. Melinda didn't need to hear it – she knew exactly what had happened. If anyone understood what it was like to snap after taking one too many losses, it was her.

"It's okay," she soothed. "I… I saw what happened this afternoon, so I know tonight was…" She faltered, at a loss for words, and instead reached out to put a hand on Quake's shoulder. Quake flinched at her touch and Melinda withdrew. "We can figure it all out in the morning, but I think some sleep would do both of us some good."

Quake let out a hollow, shaky laugh. Like the idea of sleep was so foreign and far away that it was ridiculous to suggest it. That was probably true. But it was also true that she had been pushed to the brink today, and Melinda knew collapse was probably both inevitable and imminent.

"Are you hurt?" Melinda asked, with a quick amendment. "Physically?"

Quake shook her head.

"No fractures, cuts from the glass? What about your hands?"

"No."

"You know it's worse if you don't treat things right away."

Quake's shoulders bristled, and Melinda wondered for a moment if Quake might turn around and take another swing at her for being so pushy, but the thought was quickly dismissed when Quake turned around and, instead, held her arms out grudgingly for inspection.

Her knuckles were swollen and purpling from all the punching, split open in a few places but not actively bleeding anymore. Silently, Melinda eased the gauntlets off Quake's arms and rolled the sleeves of her suit up, revealing deep, mottled bruising dappling its way up from

hand to elbow.

“Do you have any more CalciFi?”

“They gave me some to take after…” Quake’s voice cracked slightly. “After this afternoon. But I haven’t taken it yet. Didn’t want to be out of commission if something else came up.”

“I’ve got SteriStrips for those cuts, and ice for your knuckles,” Melinda said. “And you should probably take the CalciFi.”

“Yeah.”

“Do you want me to give you pressure? Might help you sleep.”

“No,” Quake said quickly. She paused, swallowed hard. “No, I… I want to be alone tonight.”

“I understand.”

And it was true, probably more true than Quake realized. Melinda understood wanting – needing – to be alone after everything that had happened that day. She also understood wanting to feel the pain that injuries or CalciFi might bring. She didn’t like it, and she didn’t wish it on Quake, but she understood. Sometimes, when the pain and guilt and grief inside was so powerful it felt like you might crack in two, it made things easier to handle if you could focus on the physical. Sometimes, you just felt like you deserved it. It wasn’t the healthiest of coping strategies, but it was real, and tonight wasn’t the night to try and talk Quake out of it.

Quake did at least accept the SteriStrips and ice before she disappeared into her bedroom, leaving Melinda to do the same. She took her time packing her suit and gear away, tucking the Fishing Net and the documents from Quinn’s office into the hidden draw with her tape recorder, cleaning the glass fragments from her suit and cape, oiling and cleaning her sword before hanging it up. It was therapeutic, the rhythm and routine of it all. It helped her decompress.

She spent a little time in the bathroom, mopping up her bloody face and applying her own share of bandages and balms to all her cuts and bruises, then sank weakly into bed, grimacing around the ache in her knee and her tender ribs. When, a few minutes later, she began to feel the pulses of pain seeping over from Quake’s room, she forced herself to stay put and respect the kid’s desire for solitude and penance, even though that felt worse to her than any of her other injuries.

Melinda was surprised the next morning when she stepped out into the main room of the apartment for breakfast and saw Quake was already up. She was dressed in sweats, sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of the big windows and staring down at the bustling city coming to life below them. She didn't make a move when Melinda appeared, or really acknowledge that she knew Melinda was there at all, and Melinda let her be.

Melinda set to work quietly in the kitchen, putting the kettle on for tea and cutting up berries for her yogurt, but she kept an eye on the kid as she worked. Quake sat stock still, never taking her eyes off the streets below. The sleeves of her sweatshirt hid her arms from view, but Melinda could see that her knuckles, while not as alarming as yesterday, still looked tender and red.

Eventually, after Melinda had eaten and the kettle began to sing, she finally spoke. "Do you want some tea?"

Quake still didn't move, but she did answer after a moment, at least. "I don't know. I've never had it, so I don't know if I like it. I don't want you to waste it on me."

Melinda almost asked how a person had never had tea before in their life, but caught herself when she remembered Quake was a former foster kid who'd been living on her own since she was 15. Tea-tasting opportunities might have been pretty scarce.

"If I made you some, would you try it?"

"I guess so."

It wasn't long before Melinda had crossed over to where Quake sat, two steaming mugs in hand. She lowered herself delicately to the floor and crossed her legs, mimicking Quake's position, and passed one of the mugs to Quake before turning to look out the window, too.

The sky was overcast, a thick, grey blanket of cloud covering the city, and the daylight that filtered through was thin. Below them, swarms of people, cars, bikes, and busses swirled and danced the choreography of life moving on.

"How'd you sleep?"

"Like shit," Quake said dully. "I gave up a little before sunrise."

“I always love the way sunrise looks through these windows.”

“Clouds made it hard to see today. But I bet it looks nice on other days.”

Melinda made a thoughtful noise, but didn’t say anything. They sat in silence for a long while, sipping occasionally. The tea was strong and sweet, and Quake kept drinking, so she must have liked it well enough.

They sat there for what must have been close to half an hour before Quake finally spoke again. That was fine with Melinda. She had always worked well with silence, and it seemed important to let Quake be the one to choose if and when they started talking.

“Deke and Gordon didn’t make it. They were gone before the Med Team even got there.”

“Your teammates from yesterday?”

Quake nodded and blinked hard a few times before busying herself with another sip of tea. When she spoke again, her voice was thick. “Raina’s in pretty bad shape, but she’s still alive. In SHIELD critical care last time I checked. That… that *thing* drains the blood out of people, apparently. She lost a lot before…”

“Before you saved her life by getting her away from the mist,” Melinda finished, quiet but firm. “I saw what you did yesterday.”

“So then you saw how I completely failed,” Quake said flatly. “How I messed up and got people killed and let a deadly alien threat escape into the city.”

“I saw a young team get thrown in over their heads against an unknown threat with no backup,” Melinda corrected. “I saw a kid doing her best to lead inexperienced agents, who saved the life of one and kept an evil alien engaged long enough that no civilians got hurt.”

“You don’t have to sugarcoat it—”

“I’m not finished,” Melinda interrupted gently. “I also saw a kid take a hard loss that would shake even the most experienced senior agents. I saw you lose two people you felt responsible for. I saw you hold your own against a horror-show of a threat, but we both know that doesn’t come without cost.”

“I can’t stop thinking about the way they looked, hollowed out like that. It all happened so fast.”

“It always does.”

“We’d been tracking these shadow reports – these sightings and strange reports – for months. Never anything concrete or actionable until yesterday. We finally thought we’d caught a break, we were trying to set up an ambush, catch the thing off guard so we could take it in, but it was like… It was like it was ready for us, expecting us. It was like it knew all our maneuvers, our tactics. It felt like we were losing before we’d even started fighting.”

A chill ran down the length of Melinda’s spine, and her mind flashed to the SHIELD documents she’d found hidden in Cybertek’s office. Yet another instance of enemies having knowledge of SHIELD’s inner workings that they shouldn’t.

“I knew in my gut that we should have gotten out of there as soon as it was obvious we’d been made, but we didn’t get a retreat order, and I… I wanted to prove myself, too. It was the first time I’d been tapped to lead the team, not an underling and not solo work, y’know? I was so stupid…”

“Where was your SO during all this?” Melinda wanted to know. “Your handler? They should have pulled you all out once things went south.”

“My SO got put on some high-clearance mission earlier in the day,” Quake said, shaking her head. “Avengers-level, I think. That was part of why I was allowed to take point in the field, with Berserker being gone. My handler… I don’t know, we were supposed to hold defensive positions and wait for backup, but I guess things fell apart too quickly for him to change tactics.”

Melinda frowned. Whether they had meant to or not, it sounded to her like SHIELD had set Quake and her team up to fail. No active SO on the mission, a slow-reacting handler, and backup that was too far out for an immediate intervention.

“They kept me at HQ after, for observation or whatever. I guess they could tell I was shaken up. My SO got back in at one point, came down on me for everything that happened, like I didn’t already know it was my fault two people were dead. I got mad and went off on him a little bit. So when the alert came in about the Cybertek break-in, he decided I should be the one to respond. To help me focus on something else, get my head back on. Learn to compartmentalize.”

“Which worked so well,” Melinda scoffed before she could help herself.

Quake winced, and Melinda chastised herself.

“Sorry,” she said. “That came out harsher than I meant it.”

“It’s not like you’re wrong. I completely lost it in there.”

“SHIELD preaches compartmentalization, and there are times when it’s the best course of action, yes,” Melinda said thoughtfully. “But sometimes compartmentalizing things, trying to file them away and lock them up and just keep moving forward… if you don’t address the heavy things behind you, they start to drag you down eventually, no matter how fast you try to run away from them. SHIELD tends to forget that.”

“Hell, if that isn’t true,” Quake agreed with a sad little laugh. “Like, when they thought sending me to fucking *Cybertek* of all places last night to try and shake me out of my feelings was a good idea… You know, the last time I went to Cybertek, I almost died. Probably not the best place to send me if they wanted me to work on staying focused and unemotional in the field.”

“You almost died at Cybertek?” A new layer of understanding settled into place in Melinda’s mind – Quake’s distraction, her uneasiness last night before they’d started fighting. It wasn’t just about being shaken from the alien fight.

“Yeah, I got shot there for sticking my nose in places where it didn’t belong. Took two to the gut. Almost didn’t make it.”

Melinda swallowed hard. The gunshot wounds. The medical report in Quake’s file. The G.H.325.

“Who shot you?”

“I don’t know,” Quake admitted. “I lost some memory from that time, all the trauma on my body, they said. I don’t think they ever figured out who did it, but somebody from within Cybertek, I guess.”

“And then SHIELD moved mountains to heal your body, but didn’t give a shit about your mind,” Melinda said darkly. “Just threw you back in like it wouldn’t matter to you to go back to a place where something horrible happened. I wish I was more surprised.”

“You know, the way you talk about SHIELD… it’s like you know them,” Quake murmured. “More than just someone who’s fought them for years.”

Melinda was quiet for a moment, considering her next words carefully. “Let’s just say that SHIELD is one of those heavy things I’ve tried to run from. Still working on dealing with it so the weight doesn’t pull me under.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean…” Melinda hesitated. She had sworn to herself that she would never talk about this with another person. That this story would stay tucked away on a tape recorder until she was long gone, and the tapes could be left with someone trustworthy.

She tore her gaze away from the window and looked over to Quake, to the hurting, unmoored kid who was looking at her with those big, dark eyes, reaching out for some kind of connection, some kind of lifeline – a perfect echo of all her failures before. Maybe this was her second chance. Maybe this was her opportunity to make right what she had done wrong before, to atone and amend and actually do something that helped, that mattered. Maybe this was the person she was supposed to trust. Maybe this was the person who could help her live up to the words Andrew had left her with, that she had never believed would be possible.

Maybe this was how she would do good.

Do good, Melinda.

Do. Good.

“I mean,” she tried again, taking a deep breath, “that I *was* SHIELD. A long time ago. I’ve been an agent. I’ve been a hero. And I’ve been used as a weapon, and I’ve been used as a tool to do a lot of things that I wish I could take back.”

“I don’t…”

“And most of all, I mean that I understand more about what you’re going through than most people. And I understand how, as much as you might not want to hear it, being a part of SHIELD will hurt you more in the long run than anyone will ever admit.” Melinda paused, swallowed hard. “I also mean that I don’t want to see them do to you what they did to me, and I’m starting to get worried that I might be

too late."

Quake narrowed her eyes. "You're lying. You're trying to… I don't know, turn me against SHIELD or something. Which is really shitty of you, even for a villain—"

"I'm not lying."

"I can't believe I fell for all this," Quake said with a shake of her head. She started clambering to her feet. Tea sloshed out over the lip of her mug. "I should never have let my guard down. And now, when I'm already all screwed up, you just… you just…"

"Quake. Daisy. Daisy, wait—"

"That's not even my name," she snapped.

"Well, it's the name you gave me," Melinda pushed back. "You want me to call you 'Skye Powers?' Because I doubt that's your real name, either."

"You don't know me," glared Quake. She slammed the mug down on a table and began stalking over to her door, probably to pack up and leave for good. Melinda had miscalculated, ruined everything. "You don't know my name. I don't know *your* name. We're strangers. Worse, we're enemies. This whole thing was such a colossally bad idea."

"Melinda."

Quake froze. "What?"

"My real name. It's Melinda. Melinda May, former agent of SHIELD, former hero known as The Cavalry."

"…I've heard about the Cavalry. She died."

"I promise you, I'm not dead." Melinda crossed over to where Quake was standing, with enough space between them that Quake could hopefully see that Melinda wasn't trying to box her in. "And I promise, I'm not lying, either. There's something… something I can show you. Just take a look at it, then decide for yourself if I'm telling you the truth or not. If you want, you can leave after that, and you'll never have to see me again. I'll disappear, if that's what you want from me. Just please, please, hear me out before you do."

“What is it? The thing you want me to see?”

Melinda gestured for Quake to wait a second, then dipped into the office to retrieve the tape recorder. She held it out for Quake to take.

“I’ve been trying to get it all down, everything that I did. It’s… it’s not finished. There’s a piece of the story I haven’t explained yet. If you want, you come find me when you’re done listening and I’ll tell you the rest. Otherwise, you can walk away, and you’ll never hear from me again. You have my word.”

Quake didn’t move at first, a beat too long, just staring at Melinda’s outstretched hand as she deliberated on what to do, what to believe. Then, she reached out and took the recorder and said the one thing that made Melinda feel like not all hope had been lost:

“Okay.”

Chapter End Notes

> They're starting to talk, and Melinda is finally letting Daisy in on her past with SHIELD! A big step forward for these two :)
>
> I can't thank you all enough for being here and for all your kind words on the last chapter <3 I'm so honored to share cyberspace with you all!

Chapter 9: An Unfiltered Truth

Chapter Notes

> TW for death of a child (context: we're hearing this story's version of Bahrain), illness/death of a spouse, mentions of Daisy's past GSW

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was almost an hour later when Quake finally emerged from her room, tape recorder in hand. Melinda had been waiting for her out in the living room, watching the city pass by through the window for most of the time. The overcast sky had given way to a heavy drizzle, and raindrops raced each other down the glass, mesmerizing Melinda as she wrestled with whether or not she had done the right thing by laying all her cards on the table with the kid.

Quake's expression didn't give much away as she walked over to where Melinda sat on the couch, and Melinda purposefully didn't reach out with her powers to get a sense of Quake's feelings. If she was trying to get Quake to trust her, invading her privacy with empath powers was probably not a good place to start.

Quake sank onto the couch, leaving a space between her and Melinda, and set the recorder on the coffee table in front of them.

"Tell me about Katya Belyakov."

Melinda nodded, swallowing hard. Outside of the recording, she hadn't so much as spoken Katya's name aloud since her death, but she knew that this was the right thing to do. She owed it to Quake and to Katya's memory to tell her story. She clicked the recorder on.

"Katya was one of the young people we had recruited into the EnReD program. She was one of the youngest we'd ever recruited – her powers hadn't even fully emerged at that point – but her genetic signature indicated that she was enhanced, and her mother was adamant that we take her. I was unsure, but our list of willing participants was getting shorter by the day, and Dr. Whitehall was happy to snap up an eager subject. And I freely admit that I didn't push back the way I should have. I kept my feelings to myself and followed orders, because that's what a good agent was supposed to do. I don't want you to think that I'm trying to separate myself from the

horrible things I did, just because I wasn't as enthusiastic as my superiors. I still did them of my own free will. I'm still responsible for them."

"I understand," Quake said softly. "But I also know how hard it is to disobey orders in SHIELD."

"Katya received G.H.325, and it worked. Unfortunately for everyone, it worked. It unlocked her enhancements, amplified them far beyond what she was equipped to handle at that point. She was an empath like me, apparently, but the way that her body reacted to the G.H.325, it wasn't just that she could sense other people's emotions. She craved them. She needed them. It was like… like she fed on them, and the stronger the emotion, the more she wanted it. Anger, pain… those are more potent than most feelings. It… it made her unstable."

"So what happened?" Quake asked. "Did she get treatment, or that memory rewriting that you talked about?"

Melinda shook her head sadly. "No. Our usual course of acclimation and training didn't help, so we had planned on dismissing her, maybe sending her through TAHITI for a memory rewrite, but her mother and Dr. Whitehall decided that it was worth taking one more shot with her, increasing her dosage of G.H.325 and seeing if her body and mind could course-correct on their own, if she had more power over herself and her abilities."

"Are you serious?"

"G.H.325 did have regenerative properties, in addition to its enhancement ability," Melinda said. "It wasn't entirely unfounded to think the way Eva and Dr. Whitehall were thinking. But it was unethical, and it was desperate, and it was wrong. The second dose only made things worse. Katya became more unstable, and her powers grew stronger. She could do more than sense emotions now, she could absorb them, and people's lifeforce along with them. And she wanted more."

Melinda paused. They were getting to the hardest part of the story now, but it was too late to turn back now. She took a deep breath and continued.

"She broke containment at the lab, absorbed her mother and some of the doctors, killing them all. She fled. There were a few civilian casualties as she made her way through the city. A team of agents tracked her down to a warehouse across town, but she absorbed them,

too. That's when I got called in. They needed a specialist to… to take her out."

"SHIELD decided to kill her?" Quake asked, barely above a whisper. "How old was she?"

"Ten," Melinda said, the words raking raw across her thick throat. "Between my dual role with EnReD and in the field, and my experience as an empath, they tapped me. I went in, saw the agents she had already killed. I had my orders. She was in so much pain, and she was begging me… I… took the shot. I held her while she died. Gave her everything I was feeling to try and make her last moments peaceful, but I… I killed her. A child."

"Melinda…"

"I was never really the same after that, but I tried to be. I tried to be a good agent, compartmentalize. But I couldn't. I quit the EnReD program, transferred to an artifact recovery field team, scrub work with little to no human interaction. My husband, Andrew, he tried to help me. He was a therapist by training," Melinda explained with a tearful chuckle. "He was always trying to get me to talk about things, and I would always tease him about it, but after that, I… I just shut down. There was a lot of distance between us."

"You divorced?"

"Worse," Melinda shook her head. "It was probably about six months after Katya's death, there was an epidemic – an alien contagion that infected a lot of people in the city. Chitauri virus. Scientists were eventually able to create a treatment for it. Vaccine or antiserum or something, I don't know. All I know is they didn't make it fast enough to save Andrew. He died, before I had really been able to fully mend things between us. He knew I loved him, at least, and he was able to tell me he loved me, too, before the virus took his ability to speak. The last thing he told me was 'do good, Melinda.' And I feel like I've failed him every damn day since."

Quake chewed on her lip, her eyes shining with shared sadness. Melinda cleared her throat and forced herself to finish the story without emotion.

"Things were crashing and burning around me, but the final straw happened on a mission. My team was sent to retrieve the Berserker Staff – it had been discovered in a tree up in Norway. I don't know if your SO has ever told you this, but the staff does more than give you

strength. It gives you rage, amplifies your most powerful emotions.

“When I touched it, it was like everything I had been swallowing down the past year all came to the surface, and I just snapped. I destroyed an entire field office, threatened to expose everything SHIELD had done with the EnReD program. They’d been keeping it quiet, see. SHIELD never even claimed responsibility for Katya, just fed the press a story about an unhinged Enhanced who killed civilians and SHIELD agents alike, and framed my killing her as a necessary action taken by a hero to stop a new threat.

“SHIELD shut me down, kept me in containment until the Berserker effects wore off. They told me that if I went public with EnReD, they’d spin the whole thing, pin it on me. My name was all over the EnReD program; it wouldn’t be hard to tie all the failures to me and absolve their own researchers of any wrongdoing. They’d have me prosecuted for Katya’s death and all the other deaths EnReD caused, and they’d get off scot-free.

“So instead, we agreed that I would walk away. They’d create a record that The Cavalry, and Melinda May, died in action, and I would disappear. It seemed like the only option I had at that point.”

“But how does Maelstromeda factor in?” Quake asked quietly. “I mean, you didn’t totally disappear if you went on to become a villain, right?”

“I took a few years away from the whole rotten business,” Melinda nodded. “Tried to rebuild, make a new life for myself. But after a while, it got too hard to ignore everything that was going on. SHIELD had made some substantial changes following the failure of EnReD, but I suspected it wasn’t as sweeping as their PR team made it seem. And there were still threats out there, still work to be done. I was done with SHIELD, obviously, so my options were limited. And villainy offered me more freedom than any other avenue. It’s not like there are a lot of paths for Enhanced people, much less Enhanced people with a skill set like mine.”

“Have you been keeping tabs on SHIELD this whole time?” Quake wanted to know.

“Somewhat, although I branched out a lot over the years. Found some employers I’m comfortable working with who allow me to operate in shades of grey. In all honesty, I’ve tried to distance myself from SHIELD as much as I can. It’s only been recently that I’ve started

digging back into them, trying to get the story straight, so the truth can be out there eventually. And then when I started getting to know you… started seeing firsthand what SHIELD was still doing with its heroes…"

Melinda shook her head. She made sure to hold Quake's eye contact for this next part.

"I looked into your files. I know that's a violation of your trust, and I apologize for that. I wanted to see what programs you'd been put through, and when I saw you'd been given G.H.325 for your gunshot wound, and that your reaction to it put you on a list for a new experimental program… It just felt like I was watching the same tragedy start to unfold right in front of me. I felt like I had to do something."

"So you took me in," Quake supplied. "I was your pity project and your in with SHIELD."

"I took you in when I found out I was the only adult you knew to pick you up from the hospital," Melinda said, allowing herself to smile. "I didn't look at your files until later. That's when I really started feeling protective, but your connection to SHIELD had nothing to do with me wanting to give you a safe place to land or a friendly face to come home to."

"Oh," Quake said. "Well, that's good, I guess."

"I don't know if SHIELD has changed for good or not at this point," Melinda told her. "That's really only something you can say, as someone who works for them and has been put through their current Enhanced programs. But I will say that, from an outside perspective, and from the perspective of someone who's seen this shit before, SHIELD doesn't look all that great. And I want you to know that it is possible to have a life outside of SHIELD."

"I don't know about that."

"I'm just saying, I wouldn't want to keep working for an organization that keeps putting my life in danger and then not doing anything to help me recover from the traumatic situations they keep sending me into," Melinda said simply. "SHIELD should have supported you yesterday, and they failed on every level. They failed to support your mission with proper leadership or backup when you faced off against the alien. They failed to support your mental and emotional wellbeing when they sent you back out into the field immediately after a trauma

– back to a site that also carried trauma for you – and they failed to support your physical wellbeing when they didn't give you time to recover between missions."

"It sounds bad when you say it like that," Quake frowned. "But SHIELD is all I have. I was broke and homeless when I got into SHIELD. They put a roof over my head, gave me a purpose, gave me a team. The agent who on-boarded me, Coulson, he was the first person who ever made me feel like he believed in me."

"And that's fine," Melinda nodded. "That can all be true. I just want you to have the full picture. Don't let misplaced loyalty blind you, especially when it might not be reciprocated in the same way."

Quake was quiet for a long time. When she finally spoke, her voice was quiet. "Can I… can I think about all this?"

"Of course," Melinda nodded. "I know it's a lot to process."

"And it's… okay if I stay here while I think?"

"I was hoping you would," Melinda smiled. "This might be hard to believe, but I've come to like having you around. It's been a while since I've had friendly company."

"It's definitely not hard to believe you haven't had company in forever," Quake cracked, returning Melinda's smile for the first time all day. "You're, like, way antisocial."

Quake tucked herself away in her room with laptop in hand for the rest of the day, no doubt trying to process everything – the alien, Melinda's story, all the new information she had received about SHIELD – and probably also to try and do some damage control with SHIELD after all that had happened in the last 24 hours. Melinda took the opportunity to retreat to her office and finally start sifting through the data that the Fishing Net had scooped up for her from Cybertek.

It was slow going – there were countless pages of financial records to read through, many of which didn't make much sense to Melinda. She began to see that Cybertek wasn't picky about who they sold their weapons and tech to; plenty of low-level thugs and goons, petty thieves, and small-time villains populated the sales logs, but so too did larger outfits like AIM and Hydra. Alarmingly, Melinda also found records indicating that a group labeled only as 'SSR' was also a customer of Cybertek. SSR was an old organization name used in the

early days of SHIELD. It wasn't used anymore, except by shadow teams who operated out of SHIELD and didn't want to be easily connected back to the organization.

She made a note of it on the list of buyers she'd be supplying to Ros in her final report and tried to push the bad feeling out of the back of her mind. It wasn't unheard of for SHIELD to use outside companies to help supplement their weapons and tech. Everyone knew Stark had been collaborating with SHIELD for years, sponsoring their heroes and providing them with cutting edge gear. Obviously, they wouldn't want it to be public knowledge that they shopped at the same store as their enemies. Still, it didn't quite sit right with her that SHIELD had apparently been dealing with Cybertek under the table.

She moved into the documents that detailed Cybertek's money next. Notes and memos about its shareholders held a number of familiar names – mostly rich, old bigwigs whose fingers and money were poked and prodded into nearly every influential company across the country. Ian Quinn still held the majority of shares, and he was followed by someone named Franklin Hall, the same name that had been written into the textbook next to Quinn's.

That familiar itch at the back of her head scratched away as she read Hall's name, the same way it had back in Quinn's office. She ran Hall's name through a quick internet search, on the off chance that it might produce something useful, but nothing popped up.

She turned then to the pages that held information about Cybertek's investors – bank records for offshore accounts where the secretive people with deep pockets could pour their money into Cybertek's projects without it becoming public knowledge – and when she reached a particular trio of names on the list, her heart turned to ice in her chest.

First was Gideon Malick, a billionaire on the board of Roxxon Energy and Gothamite Industries who was also a representative on the World Security Council.

Bad.

Next was Alexander Pierce, once a famous diplomat, now secretary of the World Security Council, and one of the highest-ranking officers (and PR managers) in SHIELD.

Very bad.

Last was Dr. Daniel Whitehall, SHIELD's resident mad scientist and man responsible for the EnReD program and about 85% of all Melinda's personal trauma.

Very, very bad.

She banged into Quake's room, knocking as she flung the door open and not caring much about the kid's privacy in the moment.

"What the hell—?"

"When you went on that first mission to Cybertek, the one where you got shot," Melinda began, almost breathless, "what was the mission? Who ordered it?"

"What?"

"What were you doing in Cybertek, that first time?" she asked again.

Quake's brow furrowed. "Why? What's going on?"

"Does the name Franklin Hall mean anything to you?"

"Yeah, he's a scientist at SHIELD," Quake said slowly.

"Shit. *Shit*."

"Seriously, what's happening right now?" Quake asked.

"Come on." Melinda beckoned for Quake to join her in the office, where she could see the Cybertek files for herself. "I'm investigating Cybertek for a client – that's what I was doing last night – and I think I've found something bigger than anyone could have anticipated."

"What is it?" Quake's eyes flew across the screen, reading the same information Melinda was still reeling from. "Wait… these are bank records. Deposits. Are you… are you saying all these guys are funding Cybertek?"

"I think so."

"And Franklin Hall?"

"He's a friend of Ian Quinn, business partner. But there's no public record of their relationship, just on the internal Cybertek documents. I found these papers—" Melinda pulled the leaked SHIELD schematics from her desk and spread them out for Quake to look at. "I thought

maybe it was a small leak, maybe parallel science or something SHIELD had bought or sold… but now it seems like…"

"Like SHIELD is giving Cybertek the money and the science it needs to make all kinds of dangerous shit," Quake finished numbly. "But why?"

"I don't know."

"When I went in there last time, I was looking for information about their funding," Quake said in a rush. "I had gone off-book a little. There were some things I noticed when I was working a different mission, some things that didn't add up, that seemed kind of suspicious about Cybertek. I brought it to my handler, got approved to do some recon on Cybertek – I wanted to know where they were getting the massive amounts of funding they would have needed for the kinds of tech they were developing. I was worried they were being paid by Hydra."

"And when you got too close, you got shot," Melinda grimaced.

"But that doesn't make sense," Quake shook her head. "SHIELD could have just let me die if they were trying to cover something up. They saved me." She bent over the computer and began typing and clicking around furiously.

"What are you looking for?"

"Memos. Directives. Any kind of communication that might show a connection between SHIELD and Cybertek beyond the financial. Maybe SHIELD is just doing some shady business and it's not as bad as it looks."

"I don't know if you'll be able to find anything like that. I set up the Fishing Net to just collect financial documents, mostly."

"The Fish—" Quake stopped herself and looked up at Melinda in disbelief. "Seriously?"

"What?"

"Do you know what this thing is?" she asked, gesturing to the Fishing Net.

Melinda crossed her arms, trying to mask her embarrassment. "Fishing Net. It searches for and collects data."

“It’s a lot more than a net. This thing plants a keylogging virus, a kind of Trojan horse thing, and also sticks an access hook into whatever system it connects to.” Quake said all that like it was so obvious, a toddler should have known it. Melinda prickled.

“So what?”

“So,” Quake said, with a smile and a roll of her eyes, “we can see anything and everything Quinn has done on his computer since you hacked it, and we now have remote access to their entire system via the ghost this bad boy dropped onto his computer.”

“It can do all that?”

“Oh my god,” Quake laughed. “You’ve been carrying around one of the most advanced pieces of hacker tech on the market right now and all you’ve been using for is a fishing net?”

“It did what I needed it to do,” Melinda grumbled. “My employers never complained.”

“I’m not criticizing you,” Quake assured her, eyes sparkling with more life than Melinda had seen from her in quite some time. “I just think it’s funny you had no idea what your gadget could do.”

“I didn’t ask Stark for a full product rundown when I stole it from him.” Melinda threw her hands up into the air in good-natured surrender. “Sue me.”

“Hey, check this out,” Quake said suddenly, attention back on the computer. “I just checked the key logs to see what Quinn’s been looking at today. Since we didn’t clean up our mess last night, I’m sure he was in panic mode, trying to figure out what had been tampered with.”

“So whatever he looked at is probably what he’s most worried about,” nodded Melinda, following along. “And probably what’s most damning.”

“Looks like the first thing he checked was a file called ‘Project Insight.’”

“Doesn’t ring a bell,” Melinda frowned. “Can we see it?”

“Yeah, give me a sec.” Quake tapped a few keys and navigated through a few levels of access screens that looked mostly like

gibberish to Melinda. “Here.”

“This looks mostly like decrypted communication logs,” Melinda observed as the screen cleared its last access block and began displaying the contents of the Project Insight file.

“Another handy feature of your Swiss-army Fishing Net,” Quake joked.

“Are these all between Quinn and the same person?” asked Melinda. “This ‘Clairvoyant’ person?”

“Looks like it.”

They both read in silence for a while, skimming through months and months of back and forth between Quinn and his Clairvoyant contact. Payment schedules, coordination for data drops, plans for who Cybertek would and wouldn’t sell to each month. It was almost unsettling how meticulous and complete the Clairvoyant’s control over Quinn’s business dealings seemed to be.

Quake sucked in a sharp breath. “Oh my god.”

“What?”

Quake pointed to a memo that Melinda hadn’t gotten to yet, another communication from the Clairvoyant dated just over a year ago. Around the time Quake had gone snooping into Cybertek and gotten two bullets for her trouble.

“*SHIELD has flagged you for investigation. Expect interference from target Richter and enact Brink Protocol – avoid immediate fatality, if possible.”*

“Target Richter… you don’t think that’s you…”

“I’m the only one at SHIELD with earthquake powers,” Quake said apprehensively. “I don’t know who else would get a nickname like that, and I’m the one who got approved for the mission.”

“So Cybertek knew you were coming.”

“And already had a plan in place to deal with me. Whatever ‘Brink Protocol’ is, it sounds like that’s what got me shot. I guess I should be glad they didn’t want me dead right away.”

Melinda pinched the bridge of her nose and closed her eyes momentarily. “This doesn’t make sense.”

“Doesn’t it?” Quake asked hotly. She pushed away from the desk and began to pace the length of Melinda’s office. “Someone at SHIELD is communicating with Quinn, leaking him all kinds of classified material and giving him buckets of money. When I got too close with my investigation, they tipped Quinn off and gave the order for me to be killed.”

“But why would anyone at SHIELD want to funnel so much to a company like Cybertek? And why try to take you out, but specify that you shouldn’t die right away?”

“I don’t know!” Quake huffed. The things on Melinda’s shelves started to rattle slightly as the air tremored around them. “But I know what it means. It means you were right about SHIELD. They’re full of shit, and they don’t see me as anything but disposable. They don’t care about me. They wanted me dead and had the gall to lie to my face and act like they were glad when I survived.”

She stopped pacing and slumped against the wall, sliding down until she was huddled on the floor, back against the wall and face buried in her fists.

“It means I managed to find yet another place that doesn’t want me,” she said, her voice empty and fragile and angry. She thumped a fist against the wall behind her in frustration. “It’s the fucking Brodys all over again, just with a gun this time. Just another place that’s not a good fit. They’re never a good fit. *I’m* never a good fit. Because I’m asking too many questions, or I’m Enhanced, or I kissed a girl once, or I’m too loud, too quiet, too disrespectful, too difficult, too much, not enough. I’m never enough. And I probably never will be, no matter how hard I try or many times I save the world.”

“That’s not—” Melinda stopped herself before she said the word ‘true.’ Maybe it wasn’t, but from Quake’s perspective, it absolutely was true. Nobody had stuck with her, had stuck up for her. “Daisy, you have to believe me. There’s someone out there who won’t feel that way. There’s somebody who’ll know you’re enough – more than enough. Maybe you haven’t found them yet, but you can’t take SHIELD’s opinion of you as fact. SHIELD doesn’t know shit. They don’t have any idea how much you matter.”

“Y’know,” Quake said sadly, not looking up from her knees, “nobody even cared that I vanished from my old life. My foster parents never filed a missing persons report, my social worker never tried to track me down. Just another runaway foster kid. Another statistic. Even

after Quake started showing up on the news, nobody came looking for me. And obviously SHIELD only cared about having another obedient Enhanced person in their toybox. It really seems like the universe is trying to tell me I'm better off alone."

"Trust me, I wrote the book on believing I was better off alone," Melinda told her, joining her on the floor despite the twinge in her knee as she lowered herself down. "It protects you from a lot of heartache, but it keeps you from a lot of the good that life has to offer, too. It's taken me a long time to learn that, and I've missed out on a lot of life because of it. I don't want you to make my same mistake."

"Well, what am I supposed to do about it? Nobody wants me in their corner."

Melinda was quiet for a moment, weighing whether or not to voice the crazy idea that had been formulating in her brain the past few days. It had the distinct possibility of going horribly wrong if she didn't pitch it correctly, but there was a part of her that felt like it was the only thing that made sense anymore.

"I do. Come to my corner. Work with me. I know we've spent a lot of time fighting each other, but I think we'd make a good team. We'll take the fight to SHIELD, make them see what they've lost by casting you aside, bring their crimes to light and try to create some justice in this world. I have a contact… a friend, I guess… I think she'll back us up if we have the evidence to really make a move on SHIELD." Melinda paused and took a deep breath, trying to pump conviction into her voice. She hoped that the kid could tell how sincere her words were. "Help me hold SHIELD accountable for everything they've done to us, to all those Enhanced people like us. Help me take them down, brick by goddamn brick if we have to."

"I… I can't," Quake shook her head, a little stunned by Melinda's proposition. "I can't just turn on SHIELD, I'd be marked a traitor… my whole career as a hero…"

"I know it's a lot to ask," Melinda said. "But I also believe it's the right thing to do and that it's worth the risk. And I'm going to do it, no matter your answer. But I'd rather have you on my side than not. I… I like having you around. I think… I think it's a good fit."

"You really think so?" Quake asked, turning careful, hopeful eyes on her. "You're not just saying that so I'll betray SHIELD and join your villainous plot?"

“I really think so,” Melinda said firmly, surprising even herself with how true and how right the words felt as she spoke them. “I think it so much that I want you to stick around, even if you decide not to help me take on SHIELD. I want this to be the place where you feel like you’re enough, because… well, because I think that you are.”

Quake looked conflicted, like part of her wanted nothing more than to fling herself into Melinda’s arms for a hug, but the other part of her was too afraid to trust that Melinda was telling the truth.

Like a bolt of lightning, Melinda was struck with an idea. She had never tried to use her empath powers in reverse, except for when Katya had taken her feelings from her, but it seemed like there was no reason why it wouldn’t work. Carefully, she reached out and placed a hand on Quake’s knee. She focused every ounce of energy she had on her own feelings, concentrating them all into a single, focused point of emotional energy, all intent on communicating the sincerity and honesty of her words, of how she felt about the kid. She used her consciousness to push, rather than the usual pull she so often exercised, and felt the truthful feeling slip away from her.

It was an odd sensation, almost like something slippery was being pulled out of her from behind her navel, and her hand grew warm on Quake’s knee. Slowly, Quake’s expression shifted as she began to feel the emotions Melinda was pumping into her.

“You mean it,” she said softly, like she could hardly believe it. “You’re not making it up.”

“I’m not.”

This time, there wasn’t anything holding Quake back, and as she wrapped her arms around Melinda, squeezing tight, the only thing Melinda could feel – too blurred and mixed up to quite tell whose emotion it really was – was something she hadn’t felt in longer than she could remember. The only thing she felt was joy.

Chapter End Notes

> The plot thickens and Melinda and Daisy are bonding! Also, it's officially July 2nd now where I am, so happy birthday to Daisy! :)

Chapter 10: An Unlikely Partnership

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next morning, when Melinda had suggested they sit down together and try to hash out a more concrete plan for taking on SHIELD and Cybertek, Quake surprised her with an odd request.

“Can I go get something before we start?”

“Sure,” Melinda nodded. “I can wait a few seconds.”

“Not from my room,” Quake clarified. “I have to run out to get it, but I should be back soon. Twenty minutes, tops.”

“Should I ask?”

“It’ll be more fun if it’s a surprise,” smiled Quake. “Don’t worry.”

She returned about fifteen minutes later, holding a plastic shopping bag adorned with cartoon smiley faces, like you might get from a gas station or convenience store. Proudly, she pulled out two electric-yellow boxes of candy.

“Code Yellow Lemon Chews?” Melinda asked, reading the boxes dubiously. “Extra Sour?”

“They were my first ever sponsor,” Quake said with a bashful shrug. “They didn’t pay me much, but I got, like, a bajillion boxes of these things. It kind of became a thing… A tradition, I guess. I do my best thinking when I’m eating one, now.”

“Here’s to tradition, I suppose,” Melinda said as Quake ripped open one of the boxes and tipped several neon hunks of yellow taffy into her waiting hand. The stuff looked radioactive and smelled like cleaning spray, but Quake wasted no time in popping a handful of the candy into her own mouth, encouraging Melinda to do the same.

“Try it, they’re good.”

Melinda obeyed, and almost immediately regretted it. She tried hard not to make a face at the overpowering sour sensation and chemical taste of fake lemon. Her mouth puckered so much it felt like it was

trying to turn itself inside out and her eyes watered.

“I feel like I’m chewing on a car battery,” she choked out, coughing slightly. Quake laughed happily.

“But it’s kind of good, too, right?”

Melinda kept chewing, trying to work the candy down enough that she could swallow. Admittedly, after the initial shock, a more pleasant lemon flavor took over. It was an improvement, although not enough of one to make the whole experience worth repeating, in Melinda’s opinion.

“It gets better,” she conceded. “But I do still feel like I need to scrub my mouth out.”

“You should also know, they do make your tongue glow in the dark for a while,” Quake grinned.

“Wonderful.”

“So, where should we start?” Quake asked as she shook more candy out of the box and began champing away at the, frankly, nuclear stuff.

“Actually, there’s something I wanted to ask you before we dive right into trying to take down two of the most powerful organizations in the world.”

“Okay, shoot.”

“I wanted to know what you wanted to be called,” Melinda said, a little embarrassed that it had taken her this long to ask. “I know you as Quake, your SHIELD file calls you Skye, and you gave me the fake name Daisy at one point, but I don’t want to keep calling you a name that isn’t real…”

Quake was quiet for a minute, chewing thoughtfully. When she started speaking, she turned her gaze to the big windows, looking out toward the outside. “My name growing up was Mary. I think my mother named me before she gave me up, but I don’t really remember, so I don’t know for sure. I got used to people only using my name when they were mad at me or when I had screwed up, mostly, so when I was out on my own, it wasn’t very hard to just throw Mary away. I needed a new identity to get into SHIELD anyway, and Mary felt like… like the scared kid nobody wanted. So I made up Skye Powers. I thought that sounded like the name of somebody strong, confident.

Powerful, like there was nothing that could hold her down. A hero's name. I know it's kind of cheesy now, but it seemed clever at the time."

"I think most people feel a little residual embarrassment at their first alias," Melinda said kindly. "Sort of like that first email account you set up for yourself as a young person. There's a fondness for it, but you can't help but cringe at yourself for choosing to identify as 'icesk8princess4lyfe' online for years."

"Ice Skate Princess?" Quake asked, fighting a smile. "Wow."

"I was very into figure skating when I was young," Melinda said. "Until I tried martial arts and learned it was more fun to hit people. That, and mats hurt less than ice when you fall."

"Did you wear sparkly costumes?" Quake teased. "What about all the hair and makeup?"

"Figure skating demands incredible athleticism," Melinda countered. "Some of those sparkly costumed, fancy hairdo'd skaters could probably kick your ass if they wanted to."

"Oh, I have no doubt." Quake raised her hands in surrender, then smirked. "I'm just trying to get over the idea of you wearing anything but black, leather, or a spiky cape."

"I contain multitudes," deadpanned Melinda. She shook her head good-naturedly. "Anyway, your name. You ditched Mary, picked up Skye. Is that what you want to go by?"

"I… I don't think so, actually," Quake said slowly. "Mary felt like a life I was running from, but Skye never felt… real. It felt like a character I was putting on – grown up hero, agent of SHIELD. I was always pretending. And people at SHIELD barely use names anyway, once you get your codename. Plus… well… I don't know, I guess now that I know SHIELD didn't really care about me as much as I thought they did… it just feels like Skye is another name for another version of me that still didn't belong. Like Skye was just as unwanted as Mary was."

Melinda made a thoughtful noise, nodded. She was pretty sure she understood what the kid was trying to articulate.

"Honestly, the only name anybody's ever used for me that really felt like they cared about the person attached to the name was… Daisy."

Quake looked a little nervous to admit that, and she shifted sheepishly as she darted her eyes over to Melinda, like she was checking to see if Melinda would laugh at the confession. Melinda didn't.

"That makes sense." Even if it was sad as hell that the only time the kid felt like someone actually cared about her was when Melinda – who had never been mistaken for warm and cuddly – used her fake hospital name.

"I kind of panicked when they asked me for a name at the hospital," Quake admitted. "I hadn't exactly thought that far ahead. They already knew I wasn't an adult, so I couldn't use the Skye identity. And I couldn't think of anybody to call except for…"

"Except for me."

"I knew you used June Johnson as an alias, and that you used that one for some of your more… civilian… activities. So I figured that one might attract the least attention if I used it. And the lady taking my info at the ER had a vase of daisies on her desk, so…"

"So Daisy Johnson was born."

"And, I don't know… maybe it's stupid to say, but… I think I like the person that I can be when I'm Daisy," Quake continued. "It doesn't feel like pretending the way Skye did, and it doesn't feel like someone's unwanted junk on the side of the road like Mary did. Daisy just feels… good."

"Good," Melinda said with another nod. "Then it's settled. You're Daisy. I'm Melinda. And we're a team, now."

"A kickass team," Quake – no, Daisy – grinned. "A kickass team who's going to show SHIELD and Cybertek what's what."

"Let's hope so."

"On the subject of names," Daisy said, cocking her head to one side, "I've gotta know – when you decided to go all supervillain, how'd you come up with Maelstromeda? I mean, SHIELD just assigns us our hero names, but villains… you guys have free reign."

"Well, Diabolica seemed a little too extreme, and Evilinda was taken," Melinda said wryly. It took Daisy a second to realize she was joking, but she snorted once she caught on.

“Seriously, I want to know,” she insisted. “Don’t tell me it’s like the email thing…”

“No, I’m still fond of the codename,” Melinda said. “It comes from a few different places. Maelstrom, obviously. When I decided to go all-in on the villain thing, I was still pretty wrapped up in my own turmoil. Felt like everything was falling apart around me and I was at the center of the storm. The maelstrom. The ending…” Melinda trailed off and smiled sadly. “Is for Andrew, actually. It’s a little bit of a roundabout story, but…”

“Tell me. I like when you talk about him.”

“Well, the two of us had this inside joke,” Melinda began. “It was kind of silly, but most inside jokes are, I suppose. We had talked for a long time about the possibility of having kids, and what our future might look like. And Andrew always joked that he wanted to name our kids after the two of us – Andrew Jr. and Melinda Jr. – which he only did because he knew that I wasn’t fond of naming children after their parents. And then one day I asked him what we’d do if our second child turned out to be the same gender as the first. If we already had an Andrew Jr. but needed another boy’s name and so couldn’t use Melinda Jr., for example. And he thought about it hard, and then he said he had the perfect backup names. And he had this look in his eye, this twinkle, and I just knew he was going to say something that would make me roll my eyes at him.”

Melinda smiled and shook her head fondly at the memory. At how playful they had once been, how happy. “He said, ‘if Melinda Jr. turns out to be a boy, we’ll call him Melvin, and if Andrew Jr. turns out to be a girl, we’ll call her Andromeda.’ I was surprised, because I assumed he’d say something like Andrea to feminize Andrew, but he said Andromeda, and it caught me off guard. And it just made me laugh so much, because there wasn’t much that caught me off guard back then. So I laughed, and he laughed, and from that point on, we always joked about our future children, Melvin and Andromeda. It was one of my favorite memories to hold onto after he died.”

“So Maelstromeda is for him,” Daisy said softly. “For the future you guys didn’t get to have.”

“In a way, yes. But more so as a reminder. Something good to hold onto while I tried to figure out how to build a life without him. A reminder to look to the stars and see him there, a reminder to do good, like he always told me to, even if I was going down a path that

didn't offer many opportunities for good."

They spent the rest of the morning hammering out the details of their plan. Daisy worked her way through both boxes of the Code Yellow candy, and Melinda polished off an entire kettle of tea before they felt like they had enough of a plan in place, at least to get them started. There were still some pieces to work out, a few gaps left unfinished because they couldn't be sure how things might shake out, but at least they knew their opening moves.

Daisy would return to SHIELD – they wanted her in for debriefing on the alien situation, and she wanted to try and dig deeper into the Cybertek connection from the SHIELD end. Daisy felt confident that she could crack into the SHIELD system from within HQ and, hopefully, find some information on Project Insight or who the mysterious Clairvoyant might be.

Melinda, on the other hand, would finish her report for the ATCU and, with any luck, be able to arrange a face-to-face with Ros to talk details and gain an ally in their investigation. Then, they would rendezvous back at the apartment, compare notes, and move forward into whichever phase two option seemed the most appropriate response to whatever they learned.

As much as she hated to admit it, Melinda felt a small flip of apprehension in her stomach as she watched Daisy, suited up in her SHIELD uniform and tugging on her gauntlets, prepare to leave. In theory, this was no different than the other times Daisy had left the apartment to go into work, but in reality, a lot had changed since the last time they'd parted ways.

Daisy had faced off against an unholy alien terror, lost two teammates, and found out that the organization meant to protect her might be responsible for her near-death experience. Melinda had watched history repeat itself as SHIELD did its best to destroy another child's life and had found herself in one of the strangest partnerships she could have ever imagined. She had begun to care about another person, to let another person into her life, for the first time in over a decade.

It was unnerving to feel as vulnerable as she did, now that she felt responsible for Daisy. Now that she wanted to do right by her, to do good. It was like her heart was no longer locked away safely inside of her chest, instead running around unguarded in the great wide world,

dressed in a tac suit and heading straight into the jaws of the beast that had torn away at them both over the years.

Not that she would ever admit to any of that or tell a word of it to Daisy. Too mushy, for one thing, and too distracting. Daisy would need to be sharp and focused to go into SHIELD and act like nothing had changed for her. While Daisy certainly had experience lying to SHIELD about her name and age, this was her first time in a double agent role, and the stakes were about as high as they possibly could be.

So instead, Melinda wished her luck and handed her a small commlink that would send Melinda a signal if things went south.

“I doubt you’ll need it,” she said, trying to boost Daisy’s confidence, “but if things get hairy, this will buzz me, and I can have a distraction in motion in under ten minutes. Trust me, I know how to pull SHIELD’s focus.”

“What are you gonna do, blow up a monument or something?” Daisy joked. When Melinda didn’t laugh, Daisy’s face dropped. “Please don’t blow up a monument for me.”

“I’m sure you won’t need me to,” Melinda said, smoothly sidestepping the details of her contingency plan. “See you in eight hours.”

Daisy left, still shaking her head in bemusement, and Melinda headed for her office. She pulled up the report she’d been compiling on Cybertek for the ATCU. It was a good report – it contained all the information Melinda had collected with the Fishing Net about Cybertek’s buyers and investors and adequately satisfied the conditions of the job – but it didn’t mention the extra information she and Daisy had uncovered about Project Insight, the Clairvoyant, or the depth of the possible connection between Cybertek and SHIELD. That information went into a separate report, one that Melinda intended only for Rosalind’s eyes.

It wasn’t necessarily that she didn’t trust the other people at the ATCU who might see her primary report. She didn’t, but that wasn’t the only reason she had to keep the SHIELD leaks close to the vest. She wanted to wait until she and Daisy had more information, more confirmation of their suspicions, before they risked expanding the circle of people who knew what they were up to. Rosalind would be looped in, but no one else at the ATCU needed to catch a glimpse of their work before it was ready. Besides, Melinda knew Rosalind well enough to know that

the dangling promise of a secret, extra file helped her chances of getting Ros to agree to meet her on short notice. Never hurt to have a little bait, even if she wasn't really trying to catch Ros – just entice her to hear Melinda out.

Melinda sent off the basic file through her usual channels of communication with the ATCU, then loaded her bonus file onto a datapad for transport. She called into the garden shop with her code phrase until she was able to get Banks on the line.

"Just dropped you all my report," she told him. "Job should be complete and up to standard, but obviously—"

"We'll reach out if we have questions or follow-ups," Banks finished. "We thank you, Maelstromeda."

"One more thing," Melinda said quickly, before Banks could disconnect the line.

"I'm listening."

I need a face-to-face with her. Today."

There was silence for a beat too long. "I don't think that will be possible. She's a very busy woman."

"I understand," Melinda said. "But I have something I think she'll want to see. Time sensitive. Tell her… tell her it involves our mutual thorn, and that it might go deeper than either one of us realized."

"One moment."

The line fell silent again, and Melinda knew Banks was taking the message to Ros. She hoped she'd given him enough to pique Ros' curiosity.

"She's interested. Usual spot, one hour from now."

"Copy," Melinda nodded. "Thank you, Banks."

"You're welcome."

The line clicked dead, and Melinda leaned back in her seat. Now all she had to do was use her few shreds of evidence and gnawing hunches to convince Rosalind Price to use the resources of the ATCU to directly confront and potentially wage war against the biggest, most well-funded and powerful hero organization in the world. Should be

fun.

The little French restaurant in midtown had been Melinda and Rosalind's meeting spot for years now. It had been a favorite of Ros' husband before he died, so she didn't use it for business anymore, apart from meeting with Melinda, but the owner still always gave them the private room in the back whenever Ros asked for it.

Rosalind was already there waiting for her when Melinda followed the waiter past the sound-proof curtain that hid the back room from the rest of the restaurant, seated and sipping on a glass of wine. She nodded in greeting, which Melinda returned.

"Something to drink for you, madame?"

"The same," Melinda said, indicating Ros' glass. "Thank you."

"Of course."

Melinda sat across from Rosalind, and the two women studied each other for a moment, sizing each other up. It had been a few months since they'd met in person, and it typically wasn't Melinda who initiated their face-to-faces.

"Thank you for meeting me. I know you're busy."

"Your message made it sound important. You've never been one to overblow things, so, needless to say, I was intrigued. The office can run without me for a few hours."

"Still, I appreciate your trust in me. The information I've found – the whole situation in general, really – is sensitive. I thought it was best to bring it to you directly."

"And?" Ros prompted, tipping her chin slightly in that way she did whenever she wanted more from people. "I know there's something you're not saying, Melinda."

Ros was one of the only people who ever called her that anymore, after Andrew died and Melinda hit the reset button on her life. It had been a huge sign of trust between the two women when Melinda had shared her name. But after a few jobs together and after Ros had confided that her own husband had died from the same virus that took Andrew, and that that loss was what motivated a lot of her current work with the ATCU, it had felt like an appropriate step in their

relationship.

“And I also want to ask for your help on something. Something big. It’ll make more sense once you see what I’ve found.”

“Now I’m really intrigued,” smiled Ros.

The waiter returned with Melinda’s wine and took their orders, and Melinda waited for him to leave again before pulling the datapad from her bag and passing it across the table to Ros.

“I looked into Cybertek, per the job,” she began.

Ros nodded. “I looked over your report before I came. The buyer list will be helpful in getting some of Cybertek’s more dangerous stuff off the streets, and the investor list… I noticed the same names caught your attention as it did mine.”

“Some on there weren’t surprises – the usual billionaires with financial stakes in the world being in a perpetual arms race. But those three… Malick and Pierce are both on the World Security Council. Pierce and Whitehall are both SHIELD…”

“If the WSC and SHIELD are both keeping Cybertek in business, then we’ve got a bigger problem on our hands than we realized,” Ros finished.

“But it gets worse,” Melinda continued. “There’s more to what I found. Things that didn’t feel… safe… to put in the report.”

“Things that I’ll find in here?” Ros tapped a finger delicately on the darkened screen of the datapad.

Melinda nodded. “You can look through it now, or I can give you the rundown.”

“We’re here, we’ve got coq au vin on the way. Might as well make conversation. And this way I’ll get to read *you* with the information, not just the report.”

Melinda smirked. “As if you could read me that easily.”

“Melinda, we can both read each other like fucking books,” Ros laughed back. “It’s one of the reasons why we keep working together. Neither one of us needs to spell things out for the other.”

“That’s true.”

“So, what is it? What’d you find that’s got you so rattled?”

“I’m not rattled—”

“Melinda, you asked me for a meeting, and I haven’t seen you look this grim since I asked you to look into that killer who was targeting Enhanced people a few years ago.”

“Lash,” Melinda nodded with a shudder, remembering the casual cruelty with which the man they’d eventually caught had confessed to wanting to ‘purify’ the world of Enhanced people. “That guy was unhinged.”

“But we handled him. Just like we can handle whatever it is you’re worried about now. So, spill.”

“I found more than I bargained for when I broke into Quinn’s office. The investors were the tip of the iceberg. Not only are people from the WSC and SHIELD funding Quinn’s endeavors, someone from within SHIELD is sending him information, too. Lots of it. I found a connection between Quinn and a SHIELD scientist, Franklin Hall, and a collection of leaked documents – schematics, formulas, all kinds of information that Cybertek’s R&D can take and run with. I think Cybertek’s getting a lot of its tech development from projects that SHIELD has worked on or has scrapped.”

“So SHIELD’s sending Cybertek money and ideas?” Rosalind’s expression darkened. “Using Cybertek as a kind of off-the-books weapons and tech developer?”

“I think so. And that’s not all. We found files on Quinn’s computer – something called Project Insight. It’s got all these communications between Quinn and someone within SHIELD called the Clairvoyant. They’re giving Quinn all kinds of information, not just project ideas and science tips. Information about SHIELD ops, about agent movement and mission plans. The Clairvoyant seems to be dictating just about every angle of Quinn’s business model, and there was even an order from the Clairvoyant for Quinn to… to take out a SHIELD agent who was investigating Cybertek.”

Rosalind frowned, her forehead creasing. “SHIELD is ordering hits on its own agents?”

“It certainly seemed that way.”

“Do you have any leads on who this Clairvoyant is?

“I’m working on it, but not yet,” Melinda admitted. “Hall, Pierce, or Whitehall are at the top of my list, but there’s nothing that points the finger at any one of them specifically yet. I’ve got someone helping me work SHIELD from the inside.”

Ros raised an eyebrow. “That’s new.”

“It’s a recent development,” Melinda said. “And it’s also the other part of what I wanted to tell you.”

“Okay.”

“You remember that program SHIELD had years ago, EnReD? For trying to redevelop Enhanced people’s powers?”

“That one that got shut down after too many failed experiments?” Ros asked. “You were part of that team, if I remember correctly.”

“Yes,” Melinda said quietly. “There’s a lot more to the story, but that’s the gist. It was a bad bet, and the higher ups took things too far. Rules got broken, people got hurt. SHIELD got a slap on the wrist when some of the details got out, and promised to change, but they covered up a lot. It was part of why I left.”

“I know you’ve always had a complicated history with SHIELD,” Ros nodded. “You never wanted to share details, but I got the broad strokes. What does this have to do with Cybertek?”

“There’s this SHIELD agent, the one who’s helping me now. She’s enhanced, one of their heroes. Our lives kind of… fell into each other recently. And I learned through her and some of her files that SHIELD hasn’t exactly shelved all their work from EnReD. It’s got a different name now, and more regulations, but the premise is the same. Use Enhanced people as your lab rats, see what kinds of powers you can create in a bottle. She’s already had stuff tested on her without her consent, and she’s been flagged for more experimentation in the future.”

“Jesus.”

“And here’s the kicker – she’s the same agent that the Clairvoyant ordered the Cybertek hit on. For some reason, I feel like this one kid is at the center of a much bigger puzzle. One that gives me one hell of a bad feeling about what SHIELD has up and running under the surface.”

“Here’s a question,” Ros said. “And not one to dismiss you, but a genuine consideration. Is it possible this is just the work of a bad apple or two? A mole, or a bad agent?”

“I don’t know,” Melinda admitted. “The thought has crossed my mind, and until we get more information, we can’t rule it out. But there are a whole lot of moving pieces in several different areas of SHIELD. It would be a lot for just one or two to coordinate. Not impossible, but difficult. And if the new experimentation protocol is connected in any way, then the issue is much deeper than just a leaker or even shady business with Cybertek.”

“If it’s all connected, it suggests SHIELD may be truly rotten from the inside out,” Ros said pensively.

They fell silent as the waiter reappeared, bringing their food and fresh water. They both thanked him and ate quietly for a few minutes, weighing everything Melinda had shared. Eventually, though, Ros broke the silence.

“What’s your play here? With SHIELD.”

“Currently, we’re still gathering intel. Investigating. Depending on what we find, we have a couple different options. If it’s a singular mole, my hero can take it to SHIELD and let them handle it, and the ATCU can handle Cybertek as planned. If it’s a bigger issue, we can blow the whistle on things, or confront certain parties if it comes to it. We’ve also considered coming at it from Quinn’s side of things. He might be easier to break than a SHIELD higher-up.”

“And where do I come into play with all this? You said earlier you wanted my help.”

“If our investigation produces credible, actionable evidence of a wider problem, I’d like your support,” Melinda said simply. “I’d like the ATCU to back me up if and when I try to bring SHIELD to justice. SHIELD has gotten away with a lot of shady shit for years, and if my hunch is correct, they haven’t changed their ways. SHIELD acts like, because it corners the market on employing heroes, they’re the pinnacle of the good guys. But we both know that’s not true. I’d like for them to be held accountable for once. For them to taste some of the justice they’re so fond of administering. If I’m right about everything, this could be the thing that takes SHIELD down for good, or at the very least, forces them to actually act like the good guys even when nobody’s watching. I think the world deserves that from them.”

“I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again,” Ros smiled. “I really do wish you’d consider coming to work for me full-time. You’re a force to be reckoned with. And you haven’t been a true and proper villain in years. Just someone who doesn’t play nice with SHIELD.”

“A lot of people would consider that the same thing.”

“But not me,” Ros said firmly. “I don’t see the world in the same black-and-white, hero-and-villain dichotomy that SHIELD does. It benefits them to paint their opposition as villains. Helps keep their hands clean. But a person like you makes things messy. I work well with mess.”

“Is this your way of saying you’ll help me?”

“You get me verified evidence to act on, and you’ll have our support. What you said earlier is true: it’s well past time for SHIELD to answer for its actions. An organization like the ATCU going after them with no foundation would be a PR nightmare, not to mention a deathblow to my career. But the ATCU shedding light on a corrupt organization and bringing them to justice? That’s the kind of thing that’ll earn both of us a goddamn medal.”

“You can keep the medal,” Melinda smiled, shaking her head. “I just want to be able to say ‘I told you so.’”

Chapter End Notes

> And so the plot to take down SHIELD begins! Also, in case anyone was worried - Andrew and Lash are two different people in this fic. I just used Lash as a throwaway enemy and he's not connected to Andrew in this story :) Melinda didn't need to deal with that angst on top of everything else lol
>
> Thanks for sharing cyberspace with me! <3

Chapter 11: An Unplanned Encounter

Chapter Notes

TW for fighting/violence, blood, and mention of past GSW

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Melinda didn't get a buzz on the commlink from Daisy the rest of the day, so she assumed things had gone well enough for her at SHIELD. If Melinda was being honest, while she was happy Daisy wasn't in trouble, there was a small part of her that was disappointed she didn't have an excuse to go and deface the big Captain America memorial statue downtown (just *deface*, not blow up, despite Daisy's earlier concerns).

When Daisy returned that night, Melinda had just finished setting out a plate of sandwiches for them and was working on tossing a salad together.

"Hey," Daisy said, dropping her stuff by the front door and taking a seat at the island. "This looks good. Thanks for… well, not cooking, I guess. Putting this together. Feeding me."

"I don't cook," Melinda said. She brought the salad bowl to the counter and joined Daisy. "It doesn't go well."

"I guess that explains all the takeout and cold cuts," Daisy grinned. "Hey, no complaints from me. I'm just happy to eat something that isn't instant noodles or SHIELD protein bars."

"Well," Melinda said, once they'd had a chance to start eating, "how did things go today?"

"Good, I think," nodded Daisy. "I was in a briefing about the alien guy for most of the morning, so I couldn't get started on our 'project' until later, but I did learn a few things."

"Like what?"

"They're calling the alien guy Hive. I guess that misty stuff it was using is actually a whole bunch of microorganisms that it can control and operate like a—"

"A hive mind?" Melinda guessed. "SHIELD originality at its best."

Daisy shrugged. “Not very creative, but effective. I mean, they called me Quake, so…”

Melinda pursed her lips for a moment, fighting a smile. “You know, when I was first starting out, before I had my other powers and was just an empath, they wanted to give me the codename ‘Shaolin.’”

Daisy’s jaw dropped. “You’re not serious.”

“I am,” Melinda said. “Shaolin. Like the monks. I guess they thought that name was a perfect fit for someone with empath powers and working knowledge of kung fu.”

“Or they were just racist,” Daisy scoffed. “I mean… seriously. *Shaolin?* Did nobody stop and think that might be culturally insensitive? Are you even a Buddhist? Or from Henan province?”

“No on both counts,” Melinda smiled. “Luckily, I was able to talk them out of it, and once I got my other powers, they picked something a little more generic for me.”

“Jesus,” Daisy shook her head in disbelief. “I guess I should be glad they called me Quake and not something worse.”

“So after you got briefed on Hive,” Melinda said after a moment, reorienting the conversation, “what happened?”

“Since they haven’t been able to find Hive after he slid into the sewers the other day, they had me take point on trying to locate him,” Daisy said. “SciTech gave me some data on the genetic makeup of the microorganisms, and I was supposed to run it through a tracking program. It does something with gamma radiation, maybe? I don’t know, it kind of went over my head, but I guess it’s supposed to trace the specific radiation frequency of the alien’s genetic signature and pinpoint a location. I tried, but the program must not be fine-tuned yet, because I just kept getting hits at SHIELD. Probably trace radiation on me and Raina from the other day.”

“How’s she doing?”

Daisy was quiet for a minute. “I’m not sure. They won’t let me see her. She’s hanging in there, I think, but there hasn’t been much good news. She lost a lot of blood and the mist stuff… infected her, I guess? I heard somebody say something about the mist hijacking her central nervous system, which sounds bad. And somebody else definitely mentioned needing to consider G.H.325, which is also bad.”

“Shit. I’m sorry.”

“Anyway,” Daisy sighed, “while I was waiting on the Hive wild goose chase, I had a chance to do some digging. I looked in SHIELD’s database for Ian Quinn, but there wasn’t anything except for basic intel on him that would be included in field reports. Franklin Hall didn’t pop up with any connections to Quinn or Cybertek, so there’s a good chance that, unless their arrangement is way off the books, whatever he’s sending to Quinn is considered a genuine leak and not an order.”

“Which doesn’t much help us in building our case against SHIELD,” Melinda frowned.

“No, but I didn’t give up there,” smiled Daisy. “I tried looking for the Clairvoyant next – somebody who uses that codename, any mention of Precognitives or mind-readers in the program, anybody who showed up in a report or briefing who might have been called that – nothing. According to the SHIELD database, the Clairvoyant doesn’t exist.”

“Strange.”

“Not as strange as this,” Daisy continued. She was starting to get excited; Melinda could feel it – not in a happy way, but in an agitated, bursting-to-spill-her-discovery kind of way. “I decided to look up Project Insight after that. And that’s where I caught a break. Project Insight exists, first of all. It’s an official SHIELD project, with listed protocols and rollout phases. It was all redacted to hell and back, so I didn’t get much detail, but it’s real and it’s SHIELD-sanctioned. It’s also locked up behind about as many security walls and passwords as something can be at SHIELD. It’s got level 10 clearance, which means that whatever Project Insight has to do with SHIELD and Cybertek, it goes all the way to the top.”

“Level 10.” Melinda inhaled sharply. That was director- and Avengers-level type shit. Only the highest-ranking people at SHIELD would have access to that. People like Alexander Pierce, for example. “So, I guess you ran into a dead-end at that point?”

“Not exactly,” Daisy said, a sly smile spreading across her face. Ripples of pride made their way over to Melinda. “I told you before, computers are kind of my thing. I couldn’t just crack into the full file, obviously. That would have set off alarms and gotten me caught before I could type ‘hello.’ But I was able to find a backdoor, which led me to some of the metadata about the file. There’s this

communication frequency buried *inside* the file data, this inactive signal. And it's got a very traceable tag. At least, traceable for someone as good as me."

"I'm not following," Melinda admitted. "What does that mean?"

"Basically, a component of Project Insight is this digital tag, a sleeper signal that gets embedded into other files. It's inactive now, but once it activates, it sets off a communication frequency into the files where it's embedded. It's like a hidden message, tucked into a bunch of files across SHIELD. Files that I could see."

"What kinds of files?"

"Personnel files," Daisy finished. "Tons of them. Had to be close to 50, maybe 60% of all SHIELD's agents, heroes, and scientists. All with this secret, hidden signal from Project Insight buried inside, waiting for some kind of activation."

"Which means that, whatever Project Insight is, not only does it go all the way to the top, but it involves half of the entire agency," Melinda said, realization and dread both seeping into her. "Which means we can definitely rule out the 'one bad apple' theory…"

"I'm not kidding, that signal is all over SHIELD," Daisy said. "It's in the files of all the guys on our list – Pierce, Whitehall, Hall – but it's in the files of tons of other people, too. Even my own handler and SO both have it hidden in their files."

"What about you?" Melinda asked, a sudden, concerning thought occurring to her. "They haven't tagged you with it without you knowing, have they?"

"I thought about that, too. I checked – I'm clean. So at least we know I'm not going to go all evil mind-control zombie on you when the signal gets flipped on."

"I know I'm not the most tech-savvy," Melinda shook her head, "but that doesn't sound like something a communication signal in a personnel file could do. Please tell me I'm right."

"I was just joking," Daisy assured her. "Honestly, it's a very small signal. Not even a word or phrase. More just like an on/off thing. My guess is that, whatever protocols are set up within Project Insight, there's some kind of directive that gets put into action once the signal goes live, and whoever's got the signal knows what to do when they

get the go."

"Then we've got to figure out what Project Insight is and what that signal might set in motion, before it goes live and we miss our chance to catch SHIELD off-guard."

"I think so," nodded Daisy. "How'd things go on your end? Is your friend going to back us up?"

"She said she would, provided we can bring her the proof. She's willing to stick her neck out for us, but not without evidence."

"So I guess we're really doing this, then," Daisy said softly. She swallowed hard. Melinda was tempted to try and sense her feelings, but she was trying to respect Daisy's boundaries. Besides, it was pretty obvious from her body language alone that Daisy was feeling the weight of turning on her own organization.

"It's not too late, if you want to back out," Melinda told her. "You've already given us more than I could have dreamed of. If you don't want to—"

"No," Daisy said. She turned to look Melinda full on. "No, I'm still in. I'm all in. It's just a lot. And it's starting to sink in that I probably shouldn't have trusted SHIELD as much as I did. The number of secrets they're keeping…"

"Organizations like SHIELD only work when information is siloed and protected," Melinda said. "That's true of any organization that works in intelligence and the hero industry. Information is power, and sometimes restricting that information is the best thing for everyone's sake. The problem with SHIELD is that, of all the secrets it keeps, too many of them are kept because it's the best thing for SHIELD's sake and for their bottom line, not for the people it's supposed to be protecting."

"I guess I'm still trying to learn the difference," Daisy murmured. "Secrets have never felt like much of a good thing to me."

"It'll come," Melinda promised her. "That kind of discernment usually comes with age and experience, two things you're on the early side of. As much as this might sound ridiculous coming from me, it's not a bad thing to trust. It just takes practice to get it right."

"If you say so."

They began to clear the supper dishes into the sink. Melinda washed and, without really thinking much of it, handed the wet plates to Daisy to dry. Daisy smiled.

“I feel like a kid again, helping to wash the dishes.”

“You are a kid.”

“I’ll be 18 in July,” Daisy said, taking the last plate.

“It’s November.”

“Almost December,” she ribbed. “Come on, don’t be such a curmudgeon.”

“A curmudgeon?” Melinda raised her eyebrows, laughing a little in surprise. “I’ve been called a lot of names, but curmudgeon might be a first.”

“I said what I said,” Daisy teased. “Tell me I’m wrong.”

“Go on, have your fun,” Melinda retorted, heaving a playful, melodramatic sigh. She flicked some of the loose water from the sink over to Daisy, splashing her. “Rapscallion.”

Daisy gaped, but her expression quickly morphed into a wicked grin. “You did not just do that.”

“That’s what happens to people who make fun of me in my own house,” Melinda smirked. “My vengeance is swift.”

Daisy looked like she was about to reach for the water and retaliate – Melinda had fought against her enough times to tell when she was about to attack – but was stopped short by the sound of beeping coming from her pocket.

“What’s that?”

“Shit, I almost forgot.” Daisy reached down and dug around for a moment, then extracted a device that almost reminded Melinda of a pager. “Your fishing net is still plugged into your computer, right?”

Melinda nodded, and Daisy took off for the office, Melinda right on her heels.

“I set up a little alert system inside the keylogging your net has on Quinn’s computer,” Daisy said as she woke Melinda’s computer and

began booting up the Fishing Net. “It’s supposed to beep me every time Quinn uses his computer, so I can see what he’s up to in real time, not just after the fact in a bunch of old logs. I thought that might be useful.”

“Has it been?”

“He hasn’t been up to much yet today,” Daisy said. She squinted at the screen and Melinda leaned in close. “But look here…”

“He’s… contacting the airfield,” Melinda frowned. Then, she watched as the readout began providing more information. “He’s requesting a flight plan for his private jet. One that leaves tonight for… Malta.”

Her stomach lurched.

“He’s running.”

“Somebody must have tipped him off,” Daisy said angrily. “And we can’t touch him if he gets to Malta. Our jurisdiction doesn’t extend there.”

“He’s our best chance at getting someone to flip on Project Insight,” Melinda said, already scanning her hand to open the wall panels that held her suit and gear. “We have to stop him.”

“This wasn’t part of the plan.” Worry bubbled out of Daisy, but she was moving to get ready, too.

“New plan,” Melinda said grimly. “Stop Quinn tonight, and we’ll figure the rest out as we go.”

They made it over to the Cybertek offices in record time, both suited up and riding on the back of the Storm Cycle. Under different circumstances, either one of them might have been more concerned about wearing their official Quake and Maelstromeda outfits while working together in public, but tonight there wasn’t time to dwell on that. There also wasn’t time to dwell on making a stealthy entrance to Cybertek like they had before, and Melinda wasted no time in slapping an explosive charge on the front door.

“Stand back a little.”

The charge blew, allowing Melinda to kick the door down. An alarm began flashing overhead, its wail echoing off the marble floors of the

lobby.

“He’ll know we’re coming,” Daisy pointed out.

“He’s making a run for it, he already knows someone’s coming,” Melinda said. She hit the button for the elevator and gestured toward the security station at the front of the room. “See if you can get into the security system from the guard’s desk there and shut the alarm off. It’s going to get annoying real fast. If you can’t take it down before the elevator gets here, though, then forget it.”

“Challenge accepted,” Daisy grinned. She darted over to the computer and began working away furiously. Just as the elevator dinged its arrival, she popped up from the desk, a triumphant grin on her face. “Done!”

The alarm silenced, leaving Melinda’s ears still ringing slightly. Oddly, the light of the alarm continued to flash.

“Damnit,” Daisy frowned. “I thought I got both parts.”

“Leave it,” Melinda instructed. She moved into the open elevator, throwing an arm in front of the doors to hold it for Daisy. “Let’s move.”

Daisy vaulted over the security desk and dashed into the elevator. The doors slid shut behind them and the elevator zoomed upwards.

“Stopping Quinn from leaving is priority one,” Melinda said as they rode. “If we have to incapacitate him to do that, we will, but I’m hoping we can just take him in without much trouble. If we can get him talking, great, but if we just have to bag him, that’s fine, too. We can make him talk later, but we can’t make him talk if he runs away to Malta.”

“You’ve got the—” Daisy started to ask.

Melinda nodded, patted the hidden pocket on her suit. “I’ve got it.”

And your friend? You said you notified her…”

“She should be bringing backup, should it come to that. She also has the authority to actually arrest Quinn, should it come to *that*.”

The elevator stopped. They moved, swiftly and silently, following the familiar path through the Cybertek offices until they reached the

hallway to the executive suite. Light poured out of Quinn's office, and through the glass walls, they could see him: a middle-aged man in a suit, looking thoroughly rumpled and thoroughly panicked as he spun around the office, throwing books and papers into a briefcase.

"It's over, Quinn."

Quinn froze and turned slowly toward the empty doorframe, where Melinda and Daisy now stood, shoulder to shoulder, blocking his only exit. Melinda could easily feel the fear oozing out of him, but he slapped a slimy smile on his face. It didn't reach his nervous eyes.

"If this isn't a strange sight," he drawled. "Maelstromeda and one of SHIELD's little junior heroes. What is this, some kind of ride-along program?"

"We know you've been using classified SHIELD data in your R&D," Daisy said stoutly, not taking the bait. "We know about the dirty money, and the backdoor deals, and Project Insight. We're taking you in."

"Where, to SHIELD?" he laughed. Then he turned to Melinda. "Or to your evil lair on a seaside cliff? Which one of you is supposed to be running the show here?"

"We can take you in conscious or unconscious," Melinda said icily. "It doesn't really matter to me."

"No, really," Quinn continued, still chuckling. "Walk me through it. I'm confused here. What is this? When the Clairvoyant told me I needed to pack, I was expecting outside interference—" He indicated Melinda. "But the baby SHIELD badge is an unexpected twist."

He turned his attention back onto Daisy, studying her masked and hooded face. "I recognize you."

"Yeah, I'm kind of a public figure," she snarked.

"No, no," Quinn tutted. Something dangerous flashed in his eyes. Hungry and mirthless. "We've met before. I remember now. You're the pup SHIELD sent after me last year, sniffing around for trouble. You're the one the Clairvoyant wanted me to put down."

Daisy tensed beside Melinda, sucked in a breath. Melinda remembered that Daisy had said they'd never figured out who at Cybertek had actually pulled the trigger on her, but now here was Quinn, not only

admitting to it, but gloating about it.

“You… you’re the one who shot me?”

“I’m a little surprised to see you still alive,” he said, still studying her curiously. “I wasn’t supposed to kill you right away, of course, but my orders were to put you as close to death as I could. I figured you wouldn’t have survived.”

Unbridled fury roared to life like a bonfire inside Melinda, and she started to lunge for Quinn, angling to sock him across his smug face for putting two bullets into a kid, but Daisy beat her to it. Before Melinda could so much as lay a hand on him, Daisy had raised her own hand and quaked Quinn so hard he flew backwards several feet and landed flat on his ass, his back shoved up against his bookshelf. Blood trickled from his nose.

“Well, I fucking lived, and now you’re going to regret it,” Daisy spat, crossing the room until she stood over Quinn, hand raised in warning. “Who gave you the order to shoot me? And why?”

“The Clairvoyant doesn’t owe me any of his reasonings for my orders,” Quinn growled back. He dragged himself upright, using the bookshelf to sit up. “His gifts, his vision… When you see the world the way he does, when you can see the path laid out in front of you before anyone has walked it, you don’t need an explanation. Only the knowledge that the universe wills it so.”

“Are you actually stupid?” Daisy asked, her mouth hanging open. Melinda felt her incredulity almost as acutely as the anger that had flared up a moment ago. “You really believe the Clairvoyant’s giving you orders because he can see the future? He doesn’t have clairvoyance, he has clearance, you moron.”

“Everything the Clairvoyant has said has come to pass.”

“Yeah, because whoever he is, he’s one of SHIELD’s top dogs. He has access to all kinds of intel and a whole agency of people to do what he says.” Daisy shook her head. “Oh my god. I thought you were supposed to be some kind of genius tech billionaire. But you’re just an idiot.”

“I suppose it makes sense,” Melinda said then, joining Daisy over by where Quinn sat crumpled on the floor. “He’s not smart enough to develop any of the tech Cybertek makes. He needed Franklin Hall for that. And he’s not smart enough to run his business. The Clairvoyant

took care of that piece."

"I built Cybertek from nothing!" Quinn insisted. "I run this whole company, a billion-dollar business—"

"You get funding from SHIELD and the WSC to make stuff SHIELD already figured out, then make more money by selling that same shit back to them and whoever else wants to pay you for it," Melinda sneered. "That's not running a business, that's running a racket."

"That's such a short-sighted way of looking at things," Quinn said with a smirk. "Don't you get it? It's the perfect business model. SHIELD pays me to make the things that they'd get in trouble for making themselves, and they pay me to arm both them and their enemies. When the bad guys have scary weapons and impressive tech, nobody questions why the good guys shouldn't arm themselves in the same way. You go on the news, stir up fear within the public about villains with cutting edge spy gear and deadly ray guns and whatever the hell else you want to say, and then people feel like you're doing them a favor when you give that same gear to the heroes. The more dangerous a villain appears, the more the world needs well-equipped, high-powered heroes. The more the world needs SHIELD."

"I got close last time, didn't I?" Daisy asked. "I almost figured it all out before. I knew there was something fishy here, and when I got too close, your boss wanted me out of the way."

"Once again, you can't see the bigger picture," Quinn said. "We wanted to keep our secret, sure, but there was something else we wanted more. Something inside of you."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Your DNA," Melinda said suddenly, as the sickening realization of Quinn's words clicked into place. "SHIELD wanted an excuse to use G.H.325 on you, to see what it would do to your body, your powers. They wanted you as close to death as possible so they could justify dosing you with the stuff, even though they were supposed to have shelved it all after EnReD."

"What?" Daisy looked pale under her mask, and her hand dipped down from its threatening position over Quinn a little. "That's… that's sick…"

"And if it worked, it would give them all the leverage they needed to start up the new program, that Terrigenesis shit, right? Stop me if I'm

getting close…"

"No, I'd say you're spot on," came a new voice from behind them all. Cold, cruel, and smug. She and Daisy both jumped at the noise and whirled around to see a young man, maybe in his 30s. He was dressed in a SHIELD uniform and had a long, silver staff strapped to his back – one Melinda recognized from years ago.

"Berserker?" Daisy looked somewhere between stunned and confused, and Melinda had to say she was feeling about the same. "What… what are you doing here? What's going on?"

"I called him," Quinn said, causing them both to look back at him. He was getting to his feet, wiping the blood from his nose and smoothing out the wrinkles in his suit. "Handy little button hidden in the bookcase, see. Sent a little SOS to the Clairvoyant."

Melinda looked more closely at the bookshelf and spotted the panic button, right within reach of where Quinn had been sitting earlier. She cursed herself for not seeing it sooner.

"You're the Clairvoyant?" Daisy demanded, wheeling back around on her SO.

Berserker shook his head and laughed. "God, no. I don't have that kind of clearance. I just do what he tells me. And when he got word that Ian here was in a bit of a jam, he sent me to clean up the mess." He surveyed the room for a moment before turning a nasty little smirk on Daisy. "I've gotta say, Quake, I was surprised when we figured out it was you who tried to access the Project Insight files this afternoon, but I'm more surprised to see the company you're keeping. I mean, Maelstromeda, really?"

"Seems like it's been working out for me pretty well so far," Daisy glowered. "After all, she's the one who tipped me off that something was rotten at SHIELD, and she just figured out your whole stupid Project Insight plot right here in the office, didn't she?"

"More or less," Berserker shrugged. "But she's missing the final piece. The ultimate goal of all this, of all of SHIELD."

"What, world domination?"

Berserker laughed. "I'm so glad we've got things out in the open and moved past the SO-subordinate thing, otherwise I'd have to give you a demerit for that smart mouth. No, not world domination. World

evolution."

"Meaning what, exactly?"

Berserker pondered for a moment before speaking again. "I suppose the Clairvoyant wouldn't mind me spoiling the big surprise. After all, it's not like either one of you is leaving this building alive. And I have to admit, it does feel good to finally get to brag about it."

"Like that ever stopped you from bragging before," Daisy muttered under her breath.

"Quinn already spelled out some of it – SHIELD turned heroism into a business decades ago, and they realized that if you artificially inflate the need for heroes, you can make a lot of money and get away with a lot of liberties, and that people will still thank you for it all at the end of the day. But it goes beyond just weapons and tech. The world needs heroes, needs extraordinary people with extraordinary power, and SHIELD's figured out a way to make them from scratch. No more waiting on the genetic lottery to churn out a few Enhanced people now and then, not when there are medicines and procedures that can take someone ordinary and make them into something more."

"This is old news," Melinda scoffed. "It's EnReD all over again."

"Not quite," Berserker corrected, an eerie, twisted grin spreading slowly across his face. "See, it's not just about bulking up already Enhanced people anymore. They still make the best lab rats, but it's gone beyond them. It's about finding a way to make superpowers a mass market. Imagine how much someone might pay for a single little Terrigen pill, for the chance to fly or lift a car over their head. Imagine how much governments would shell out so *all* their soldiers could be super soldiers."

"You're nuts—"

"I worked in EnReD for years, I know that technology," Melinda said. "It doesn't work on regular people. That was the point of the whole program…"

"Doesn't it?" Berserker asked. He took a step closer to them, pulled his staff off his back. Daisy raised her fists instinctively, and Melinda unsheathed her sword. "When I first joined SHIELD, I was nothing. A nobody. Just regular old Grant Ward, agent of SHIELD. Then I got this little beauty in my hands, and it gave me power. It made me into something. Something strong, something special. Something that

demanded people's respect. I wasn't Grant Ward, I was Berserker. But it wasn't enough. The effects are temporary, you see. So when our mutual friend Dr. Whitehall approached me with an idea…"

He trailed off, the sickening grin deepening, looking almost gruesome in the still flashing lights of the silent alarm. "Well, let's just say I jumped at the chance to become something even more than Berserker. It wasn't easy, but it worked. I'm more than I ever was. I'm eternal, now. I'm *legion*."

At first, Melinda had thought it was a trick of the flashing light, but she soon realized that his face was contorting unnaturally, transforming before their eyes. His bones shifted, growing him an extra foot. His eyes reddened, sinking deep into his elongating face, and his skin turned an ugly, greyish-purple color. Tentacles sprouted from his head.

"You're… you're Hive," Daisy gasped, stumbling away from him. "You killed those agents. Put Raina in the hospital."

"Where she's receiving G.H.325 as we speak," Hive said, his voice an unsettling combination of human and alien. "Pushing us ever closer to a fully functional, fully-sanctioned Terrigenesis program, ready for every agent in Project Insight to jump right aboard as soon as they get the signal."

"What the hell?" Quinn, whom they'd all but forgotten about, made a squeaking sound from behind them. "What is that thing?"

"The future, Mr. Quinn," said Hive.

"Fuck the future," Quinn spluttered. "The Clairvoyant never said anything… If I'd known…" He bolted for the door, but Daisy sent a quake blast at his legs, sending him crumpling to the floor in a heap once more.

"You're not getting away that easy," she grimaced at him. "People who shoot other people still have to go to jail, alien freaks or not."

"I think you broke something," he whined.

"I'd suggest you drag yourself over to the corner behind the desk," Melinda told him coolly. "Unless you want to be underfoot for this next part."

Quinn obeyed pitifully, leaving Daisy and Melinda to face off against

Hive on the open office floor. Melinda could feel Daisy's fear, but she could feel Daisy's determination to push past the fear, as well. She could feel the evil radiating from Hive, too, and something that felt alarmingly like glee. He was excited. He thought he was going to enjoy this.

"Daisy, I watched you fight him the other day," Melinda said, her voice low and steady. "Your powers were almost enough to keep him at bay on their own. Play to your strengths, and let me play to mine."

"Okay," Daisy said uneasily. "Count of three?" She cut her eyes over to Melinda for a split second, imploring her to remember the last time they'd said that in this office, to understand. Melinda nodded.

"Three."

Instantly, Daisy thrust both of her hands forward, sending a seismic shockwave out from herself and blasting Hive with it, full force. The glass walls around them all shattered, and Hive went flying backwards until he crashed limply into a concrete column on the other side of the building floor.

Melinda charged, sword flashing.

Daisy sent another quake, a smaller, more controlled one, this time training it on him and sustaining it as she also began to charge forward. The quake held Hive in place on the ground.

Melinda swung her sword at him, but Hive fought against the pressure of the quake and managed to lift the Berserker staff in front of him. The staff caught the blade and deflected it. Melinda spun, reorienting for another strike. She stabbed downwards, trying to pin him to the ground, but he twisted away.

"It's getting hard to hold him down," Daisy warned, her voice thin. "I can't keep a quake going for this long without stopping and starting a new one."

"Reset!" Melinda called. "I can handle him for a second."

The quake stopped, and Hive wasted no time in using the break as an opportunity to get to his feet, using the staff to stand and parry Melinda's furious barrage of sword swings. She hacked and swung at him, constantly moving so that he'd have no chance of returning the attack with his own weapon. She nearly got him a few times, but he was well-trained and managed to evade any direct hits.

“Drop!” came Daisy’s voice, and Melinda obeyed without thought, crouching low and rolling away from Hive. The Berserker staff whooshed over her head, then a fresh blast of quake energy hit Hive square in the chest, forcing him back against the column until he was pinned. The staff fell out of his hands.

Daisy got in close, using both hands to send as much force Hive’s way as possible. She directed the quake upwards, lifting him a few inches up off the floor, still pinned against the column.

“This is for our teammates,” she said, her voice deadly serious. Her arms flexed and her shoulders stiffened, the muscles in her body taut as she pumped all her strength into her quake. Melinda heard a sound like a dull crack and watched as part of Hive’s chest appeared to cave in slightly. The concrete of the column behind him cracked, jagged lines snaking up and down as the whole building began to tremble around them.

“The weak aren’t worthy of our future,” he wheezed. A nasty grin split his terrible face. “But their sacrifice is always appreciated.”

With what must have taken considerable effort, Hive raised a trembling arm, and Melinda realized what he was doing a split second before it happened. The grey mist seeped out of his hand and began drifting straight towards her. She scrambled back, trying to get away from its reach.

Daisy noticed.

“No!”

Daisy took one hand away from the concentrated blast she was using on Hive and used it to push Melinda further away. She paid for her distraction.

Hive slipped down the column, feet back on the floor, and used his other hand to retrieve the Berserker staff from where it had fallen. He swung it upwards in a wide arc, catching Daisy clean across the side of the head. She reeled backwards, dazed, and the break in concentration was enough to make her lose the quake. She stumbled, wobbled, then fell to her knees. Blood dripped from her temple where the staff had hit her.

Now unfettered from the restraint of the quake, Hive descended hungrily upon Daisy. With a roar, Melinda launched herself at him. She dropped to her knees as she ran, sliding across the polished

marble floor and under the harrowing cloud of deadly mist, and swung her sword at Hive's legs, taking them out from under him before he could reach Daisy.

He crashed to the floor in front of Melinda, who popped back up, sword at the ready. She drove the sword down, plunging it deep into Hive's chest. He made a horrible, gurgling sound, then let out a rattly breath. One arm twitched at his side.

Melinda gave the sword a sharp twist, felt Hive's blood starting to pool around her hands. He was almost gone.

That's when Daisy screamed.

Melinda twisted around and saw, to her horror, that the grey mist had made its way over to where Daisy had fallen, no doubt guided by Hive's twitching hand. The mist started to swirl around her, began to turn red as it sucked the life from Daisy.

Melinda let out a howl of desperation and forced her blade in as deep as it would go, until Hive stopped moving once and for all. His last breath hung in the air like a toxic fog, and Melinda felt the muscles in her arms go limp. The sword clattered from her hands and she bolted for Daisy's side.

The mist was gone, dissipated without Hive to control it, and Daisy wasn't completely hollowed out, the way the two dead agents had looked the other day, but she didn't look much better. Her face was a chalky white, and her cheeks were sunken, giving her face a thin, empty look.

Melinda scooped her up, cradled her in her arms the way she had the night of the CalciFi, tried to pump something, anything, any kind of emotional adrenaline into her that would help. Daisy felt much lighter than she had before, like she was wasting away. Her chest heaved sporadically with wheezy, labored breaths.

"Oh god, Daisy. Come on. Come on, Daisy, stay with me. Stay with me."

Chapter End Notes

:)

(please don't be too mad at me, I won't leave the cliffhanger hanging for too long!)

Chapter 12: An Unknown Outcome

Chapter Notes

TW for hospital setting/medical language, mention of blood

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Melinda didn't know what to do. She was kneeling amidst a blanket of broken glass on the marble floor of the Cybertek offices, holding the only person in the world she cared about at the moment, and feeling the life slip away from her with each agonizing, passing second. Daisy's breaths were growing shallower and sharper, fewer and far between. What little color was left in her face was draining away. And Melinda didn't know what to do.

Trying to focus her panicked mind, Melinda looked around the destroyed office wildly, as if there might be some kind of sign about what her next move should be. Daisy needed help. Medical attention. Treatment from somebody better trained than she was.

Melinda got to her feet, ignoring the sharp twinge in her knee as she lifted Daisy up along with her. Even without her super strength, Daisy hardly weighed anything to her anymore, after that *thing* had nearly sucked her dry. The lights of the alarm still flashed, making everything around the office look blurry to Melinda's eyes as she staggered over to the elevator. It took her a second to realize that it wasn't just the lights that were blurring her vision – it was tears, too.

She reached out to hit the elevator button with shaking, red-streaked fingers, only to notice that the elevator was already lit up and humming. Someone was coming.

Melinda's mind raced. Quinn had tipped off SHIELD earlier, and SHIELD had sent Hive. Maybe they were sending someone else to finish the job. She backtracked, pulling Daisy along with her. She was limping – stupid, *stupid* knee – and couldn't get to cover quickly enough. The elevator dinged, and she heard the sound of the doors sliding open. She lowered Daisy back to the floor and positioned herself in front of her, drawing a knife from her belt. She braced herself for a fight, ready to keep her body between the newcomers and Daisy at whatever cost.

"Melinda, fucking hell…"

It was Rosalind.

Rosalind, whom Melinda had contacted an hour ago. Who had promised backup. Whom Melinda had completely forgotten about.

Melinda's knees began to tremble, and she sank back to the floor numbly, shaking so bad it was like Daisy was quaking the place.

"Melinda, talk to me." Ros was at her side, a team of ATCU agents advancing in behind her, clearing the floor. Ros quickly took stock of the scene in front of her and motioned to one of the agents. "Radio for medical, stat. We need an evac team."

"The floor's secure," Melinda said flatly, her old agent training taking over and putting her on autopilot. "Quinn's in the back office, injured but alive. One confirmed kill." She twitched her head over in the direction of Hive's body, but she wasn't able to bring herself to look at him. "One agent down and in critical condition."

"Jesus, is that Quake?" Ros asked, kneeling down to check for a pulse on the side of Daisy's neck. "*Quake* is your contact inside SHIELD? What happened to her?"

"That thing… Hive… drains people. She saved me from him, but I wasn't fast enough… I wasn't fast enough to… she's just a kid…"

"Hey," Rosalind's voice was kind, but firm. "We've got her now. We'll do everything we can."

More ATCU agents emerged from the elevator, including two with a rescue stretcher. They began to work on Daisy, getting her on the board, checking for vitals, strapping an oxygen mask over her face. They had only been with her for a few seconds when Daisy let out a horrible noise, a gurgling, choking kind of breath, and her whole body seized. She convulsed for a moment that felt like an awful eternity, and Melinda felt Rosalind's strong hands on her arms, holding her back from rushing over to Daisy's side.

"Daisy!"

As quickly as it had come on, the seizure passed, although Melinda felt like she had just aged about ten years in the few seconds that had ticked by. She wrenched her arm out of Ros' grasp and elbowed past the medical team, scooping up Daisy's limp hand.

She glared up at the med team. "Do something!"

“We need to get her out of here, now,” one agent said, more to his colleague than to Melinda. He pushed Melinda gently out of the way and both men lifted the stretched and headed for the elevator. “Start her on full-spectrum antibiotics and antiseizure medication, prep for a blood transfusion…”

Melinda’s head swam. The medic’s voice sounded like bees to her ears, but one thing he said caught her attention.

“Penicillin!” she choked out, as the men carried Daisy into the elevator. “She’s allergic to penicillin!”

“Copy that,” the medic nodded. “We’ll do our best, ma’am.”

The elevator doors closed, and a painful, swollen silence fell over the hallway, but only for a moment, before several ATCU agents emerged from the other end of the building, a handcuffed Ian Quinn in tow. His ankle was splinted, and he dragged it behind him awkwardly. Melinda felt no sympathy for him.

He blanched when he saw Hive’s body, but still managed to turn a scornful glare at Melinda on his way out.

“None of this is going to stick, you know,” he called back to her. “No one’s going to believe a word you say. You’re a villain who killed two SHIELD agents and attacked a philanthropist tonight. You’ll be taking my place behind bars soon enough.”

“Shut up,” an ATCU agent grunted, cuffing Quinn roughly on the back of the head. “You have the right to remain silent – maybe you should try it.”

The elevator doors opened and shut once more, this time whisking Quinn and the rest of the agents away, leaving Melinda and Rosalind alone in the terrible silence.

“Melinda, what the hell happened here?” Ros asked quietly. “It looks like a bomb went off, you’re covered in blood…”

“Quinn was trying to make a run for it,” Melinda finally said. “So Daisy and I came over to cut him off, stop him before he got away and we lost one of our best leads. He called SHIELD for backup, and SHIELD sent him.” Melinda nodded towards Hive.

“SHIELD sent a life-sucking alien?”

“He’s an agent. A hero, ironically enough. One of SHIELD’s experiments. The tentacles are just a feature of his transformation. There was a fight. People got hurt. I killed Hive. That’s the short version.”

“I’ll call an ATCU clean-up crew to come take care of this office,” Ros said, looking around at the broken glass, the cracked pillar, the blood on the floor, the body. “We should get you looked at by medical, too. Then maybe later you can tell me the long version.”

“I’m fine.”

“Don’t bullshit me. I’m getting you checked out.”

“Ros,” Melinda said suddenly. “SHIELD’s going to know. They’re going to know everything’s blown when Hive doesn’t report back in. You have to move on them now, before they can cover everything up again.”

“What exactly does ‘everything’ entail?”

“Everything that we were afraid of,” Melinda said, her voice low. “We were right, about pretty much all of it. The dirty deals with Cybertek, the secret experiments… worse than we thought, honestly. Whoever the Clairvoyant is, Pierce or Whitehall or whoever the hell… You can’t let him get away.”

“Do you have proof? Something my people can act on?” Ros looked pained. “I believe you. And I want to help. But we have to do it right, or it won’t matter. It won’t stick.”

“I have proof.” With some effort, Melinda managed to twist around enough that she could extract the small, black box from the hidden pocket on her suit. The tape recorder.

“Daisy—” Her voice stopped working for a second, her throat suddenly thick. She coughed and tried again. “It was her idea, to bring this along. In case she could manage to ‘*get the bad guys monologuing,*’ in her words.”

“Smart kid.”

“You have no idea.”

Melinda passed the tape recorder to Rosalind. “Everything you’ll need is on there, straight from the mouths of the ones responsible,

including me."

"I'll start making some calls."

Melinda had eventually agreed to be transported to the ATCU's medical facility, although the doctors there quickly discovered she didn't have much in the way of injuries that needed attention. Which she had told them. More than once.

They did at least give her some strong medicine for her knee pain, plus a compression sleeve for it that they insisted she wear.

"You really should be icing and elevating it, too," the doctor had scolded her. "But if I can't make you stay in bed, you can at least wear the sleeve."

She wanted to stuff the stupid thing down the doctor's throat, but she figured Ros wouldn't be particularly happy if Melinda traumatized one of her doctors, so she forced herself to play nice and offer the doctor a begrudging 'fine.'

They wouldn't let her see Daisy. Said things were still 'touch-and-go' and the situation was 'too delicate' for Melinda to be there. The updates they brought her were sparse and sporadic, and often filled with only measly bits of information that, more often than not, made Melinda feel worse, rather than better.

"Her body isn't responding to the first round of medication."

So try something else. Try anything. Save her.

"The blood loss is putting a strain on her heart and lungs. We've put her on a ventilator to increase oxygen flow and we're using a percutaneous VAD to help her heart keep pumping what blood she has left."

Is that good or bad? What's a percutaneous VAD? Why can't you get her more blood?

"She's been moved to a hyperbaric chamber. We've dropped her core temp and stabilized her for now."

Stabilized. Did that mean—?

"You can come see her," the doctor nodded. "I want you to be prepared, though… it might look frightening to see all the machines

she's hooked up to."

"I don't care," Melinda said automatically. "I just want to see her."

The doctor led her through the halls of the medical facility, stopping outside a heavy, windowless door. "She's in here."

The room inside wasn't very large, and most of the space was taken up by a large, humming machine that looked almost like a metal cocoon. A complicated computer panel was attached to one side, glowing with numbers and readouts that meant nothing to Melinda and giving off a quiet, steady beeping. She approached the machine tentatively and found a small window in the top of the cocoon.

"Oh, Daisy…"

Daisy was inside the machine, resting supine on a stretcher. Her face was pale and gaunt, which made the angry, red gash on the side of her head from the Berserker staff look ten times worse. Her chest rose and fell weakly, always in time with the beeping of the machine.

"The hyperbaric chamber has stabilized her, which means she's not getting any worse," the doctor explained, stepping in closer to Melinda and the machine. "At this point, it's hard to say if she's getting any better. She's lost a lot of blood, and the ectoparasites that attacked her caused a neurochemical reaction – they attacked her nervous system and her brain chemistry. That's likely what caused the earlier seizures. We're not entirely sure the extent of the damage, but our preliminary tests suggest that the attack is designed to make her body more susceptible to surrendering to the host."

"What does that mean?"

"We think the neurochemical attack made it easier for the ectoparasite to feed on her blood, like how mosquito saliva acts as an anticoagulant when it feeds, and created a neurological response in her brain that overrode her body's natural survival instincts. It overstimulated the nucleus accumbens in her brain, creating a kind of dependency on and longing for connection with the host. Think of it almost as an addiction."

Melinda pinched the bridge of her nose. She was too tired and too stressed to try and decipher the scientific jargon. "Is she going to be okay?"

The doctor was quiet for a moment – too long of a moment for

Melinda to be comforted.

“We don’t know, yet. We’ve given her a blood transfusion to try and replenish what she’s lost, and we’re hoping that the latest course of medication we’ve administered will help with the seizures and the withdrawal symptoms left behind from the ectoparasite’s chemical attack. But at this point, I think we’ll just have to wait and see.”

Wait and see.

That’s what they’d said when Andrew first got sick. They’d given him what medicine they could, but they had no way of knowing if it would help. *Wait and see*, they said. Wait and see and hope he pulls through.

It had been so long since Melinda had allowed herself to hope, had needed to exercise that atrophied muscle. She didn’t know if she could do this a second time. If she could sit by, unable to do anything but wait and watch as someone important to her withered away.

“There’s not *anything* you can do?” she asked. It came out harsher than she meant, almost a demand. “You’re a doctor for god’s sake, isn’t there something else you can do for her?”

The doctor fixed her with a heavy gaze, the feeling of resignation overtaking the room.

“I’ll give you two a moment alone.”

The doctor left, and the sound of the machine’s hums and beeps filled the room, their noise almost deafening in the absence of anything else to distract Melinda. She let out an angry huff, furious at feeling so helpless and began to pace the room in agitation.

Wait and see. Wait and see.

“Damnit!” In a moment of lost control, she spun around and slammed her fist into the wall behind her. She must have swung harder than she realized, because when she pulled her hand away, the imprint of her fist had dented its way into the wall.

Her throat grew thick with emotion, although which one, she couldn’t be sure. Maybe shame at her outburst, or guilt for putting Daisy in this situation. Maybe just fear, pure and simple. Fear that she would lose Daisy. That she had left things unsaid, unfinished in their short time together. That she would be alone all over again.

She crossed back over to the machine and placed her hand on the small window. Spread her fingers out. Tried to imagine that it was the same as holding Daisy's hand.

"Come on, Daisy. Don't quit on me. Please. *Please*. Don't you dare give up."

She lost track of time in the windowless room. There was a chair – she sat eventually, when her knee made it too hard to keep standing. She must have fallen asleep at some point, because the next thing Melinda knew, she was awoken by the sound of the door opening. She straightened up in the chair and saw Rosalind, looking very tired and very rumpled, step into the room.

"Hey."

"How's she doing?" Ros asked.

"Not sure." Melinda's voice was quiet, croaky from being woken up. "The last time we talked, the doctor said she wasn't getting worse, but they were still waiting to see if she'd start getting better."

Rosalind didn't say anything for a long time, just stepped closer to the machine to take a heavy, careful look at Daisy inside. Melinda could feel a bundle of emotions swirling out of Ros – exhaustion, anxiety, anger, and, interestingly, satisfaction.

"We had a good night," Ros finally said, stepping away from the machine and settling into the other chair beside Melinda. That explained the satisfaction. "Quinn flipped the minute we threatened to freeze his assets. Between everything you caught on tape and everything Quinn told us once he started squealing like a stuck pig, we had everything we needed for a full takedown of SHIELD. Got support from the DOJ and a UN taskforce, so we had the manpower we needed for a complete raid. Obviously there's mountains of bureaucracy to work through before anybody starts answering for their crimes, but we've got all the major players in custody. Pierce, Whitehall, Hall… We're starting to round up all the agents with that tricky little signal the kid found in their files. Even Malick got picked up by INTERPOL on financial charges."

"Good," Melinda said numbly. "That's good."

"That's very good," Ros stressed. "You did it, Melinda. You stopped them. You made sure those bastards will never make another dime off

of a gun sale or a hero's back. You made sure they'll never have a chance to run another twisted experiment or put an Enhanced person through hell for the sake of their mad science. You did that."

"No. Not me."

"Yes, you." Ros looked at her, long and hard. "Just because you're beating yourself up right now doesn't mean you don't get to take credit for the win, here. Because this was a big fucking win. This is going to change everything."

"I couldn't have done it without her," Melinda whispered, eyes burning. "And it's going to cost her her life. One more hero I've killed. One more kid whose future I stole. All for the goddamn greater good. I'm just like them. Still. After everything, I'm still just like them."

"Don't—"

"It should have been me. It was going to be me, but she had to go and be a big, damn hero—"

"Melinda," Ros said sharply. "Stop. You can't think like that. I won't let you, because it's not true. You didn't get the kid hurt, SHIELD did, and now SHIELD is facing justice because of what you – the two of you – managed to do. Plus, if I know anything about Quake, I'm guessing she'd give you an earful if she knew you were blaming yourself. She's a hero. She made a heroic choice. The same choice she'd make every time, I bet."

"Every time," Melinda said softly. "She's a hero, through and through."

They were both quiet for a moment, watching the lights on the machine, the feeble rise and fall of Daisy's chest. Both lost in memories, no doubt.

"There's something you should know," Rosalind finally said. Melinda tore her eyes away from Daisy and looked up, curious.

"What?"

"Everyone we've brought in so far – Quinn, Pierce, Whitehall – none of them are giving us anything on the Clairvoyant. No one's claiming the title, no one's giving up a name…"

"They're lying," Melinda shook her head. "Covering for each other,

or… or…"

"I don't know…"

"But it has to be one of them," Melinda frowned. "I mean, Pierce… the Clairvoyant had high level clearance, had to be smart enough and connected enough to pull all those strings. That sounds like Pierce to me."

"He says it's not him. Says that he got encrypted messages from the Clairvoyant, same as Quinn. And he had no idea what we were talking about when we pressed him on Project Terrigenesis."

"Whitehall, then," insisted Melinda. "He's certainly twisted enough to go all-in on the science experiments. He'd stop at nothing to make his next discovery."

Ros shook her head. "Same thing. Claims he got orders, that he only cares about the science part. Something's not sitting right with me. As crazy as it sounds, I honestly think I believe them all. I think we're missing something, that we haven't found the Clairvoyant yet."

"So how do we find him, then?" Melinda asked. "Go through every single agent tagged in Project Insight until one of them gives him up? We can't just sit around and wait until he sends another blood-sucking science experiment after us."

"Starting with the Project Insight files probably isn't a bad idea," Ros admitted. "SHIELD's whole system is locked down at the moment, and we probably won't get clearance to starting combing data for a few days, until we can get our paperwork and warrants lined up. It's honestly too bad Quake's out of commission, we could use somebody like her to break us into the SHIELD files and let us look for anything we could use to trace the Clairvoyant."

Melinda thought hard for a moment, before a small, hopeful filament of an idea flickered to life in her mind. "What about the SHIELD agents who are left? The ones who weren't a part of Project Insight? What if we got one of them to give us access? Would that work?"

"Maybe." Rosalind gave her a curious look. "Why? Do you have someone in mind?"

Melinda got to her feet, inhaling sharply around the twinge in her knee. Maybe she couldn't do anything to help Daisy right now, but this could be her opportunity to at least make sure Daisy's sacrifice

wasn’t in vain.

“There’s one person, an agent, high level. Someone who’s helped me before. Let me reach out to him and see if we can’t smoke out the Clairvoyant once and for all.”

Chapter End Notes

> Hmm, most of the bad guys are rounded up, but the Clairvoyant still looms large... any guesses who it might turn out to be? And poor Melinda is not doing well with Daisy in such bad shape :(
>
> Abundant thank yous to each and every one of you for being here and sharing this space with me - you all seriously make my day!!!

Chapter 13: An Unseen Enemy

Chapter Notes

> TW for minor fighting/violence, presence of a gun, discussion of medical procedures/experiments

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was more than a little disorienting to leave the ATCU medical facility and realize that it was well into the afternoon, not still the middle of the night, like Melinda had thought. The daylight hurt her eyes after spending all night in the windowless rooms and artificial lighting of the medical facility, but the sharp, chilly breeze that clipped across her face was a welcome change from the stuffy air she'd been breathing for hours. She felt more awake than she had, now that the cold, fresh air was skinning her cheeks and clearing out her lungs.

Deciding that she could spare the time, Melinda headed first back to her apartment to get cleaned up and change into something less conspicuous than her Maelstromeda costume.

A golf ball of emotion clogged up her throat at the sight of Daisy's door, left open and giving Melinda a clear view of Daisy's things, mostly strewn about and waiting for her to return. The hula girl sat atop the dresser, perfectly still without anyone to nudge her, and the stuffed elephant was sitting on the unmade bed, propped up against a pillow like Daisy had set it there on purpose. Like she couldn't be bothered to take the time to make the bed, but the time to make sure her stuffed animal was in a comfortable spot was well worth it.

Melinda turned away brusquely, shoving the thought from her mind before tears could spring up or she felt like punching another dent into the wall.

She put her own things away in the office, electing to clean her suit and sword later, when she had the time to do it properly, then scanned her fingerprint to pop open the secret drawer and retrieve Coulson's commlink. She sent him a short message asking to meet, and by the time she had showered and dressed in comfortable civilian clothes – jeans and a leather jacket, same as she'd worn the day Daisy had called her from the hospital, she remembered with a painful lurch – he had responded with a time and place for them to rendezvous.

An hour later, she pulled up outside the familiar, formidable entrance to SHIELD HQ. The building itself looked unchanged, but the collection of ATCU agents swarming like ants around the perimeter was a jarring reminder that everything was different.

She flashed the badge Rosalind had lent her to the agent guarding the main door, and he nodded her through without a word. Inside, more ATCU agents were milling around, some boxing up materials from offices and labs, some escorting SHIELD agents out in handcuffs, and others still speaking to other SHIELD agents – ones who, presumably, weren't implicated in the Project Insight roundup. The big holographic display of Avengers legends that normally anchored the middle of the entrance hall was turned off, leaving the room feeling even more cavernous and empty than normal, and the display screens normally alive with mission updates and call times were dark, too. The whole place felt like a husk.

Nobody paid Melinda much mind as she crossed the big hall and headed up the cascading, double-wide glass staircase, then down the hall that led to the office where Coulson had asked her to meet. The hallway spiked away sharply from the main part of the building, winding back into the deep innards of SHIELD, away from the regular traffic of agents and heroes. Melinda had only been back this way twice before, and neither time had been particularly pleasant.

When she finally reached the imposing door that protected the office marked 'DIRECTOR,' she was surprised to see it ajar. Knocking on the open door, she poked her head in and saw Coulson standing behind a massive desk, shuffling through stacks of paperwork with a bemused expression on his face. He looked up at the sound of her knock.

"May, hi. Come on in. You can shut the door behind you."

She obliged, stepping into the room and pulling the door shut behind her. She looked around for a place to sit, but every available chair was piled up with papers, file boxes, or locked cases that looked like they had been dropped off by SciTech.

"Can I—?"

"What?" Coulson blinked, like he was finally processing the scene in front of him and what Melinda was asking. "Oh, yes, sorry. Just throw that stuff anywhere. I'm a little in over my head here."

"Nice digs," she nodded as she lifted a trio of silver SciTech cases out of a chair and set them delicately on top of a stack of folders on the

desk. She sank into the chair, grateful for a chance to rest her knee. “So, director, huh?”

“Director by default, I suppose,” Coulson said with a little shrug. He gave up trying to flip through the file in his hand and tossed it into a pile, then took a seat himself. “Working at the Avengers level for as long as I have got me up to a pretty high rank, but I guess I didn’t realize how high until everyone above me got carted off by the ATCU and I was the only one left.”

Melinda was quiet, more focused on stretching her powers out than chatting. She was curious how Coulson felt about his sudden promotion, and about the ATCU raids. Nothing was coming across particularly strongly – a little nervousness, a little guardedness, but a little confidence, too. A dash of pride and excitement.

“I’m still kind of in shock about it all,” he continued, apparently not noticing Melinda’s lack of conversation. “The ATCU hasn’t told me much, just that they’ve taken in a lot of SHIELD agents and officers for… a lot of things. A lot of financial stuff from the high levels, allegedly, and practically the whole SciTech division. There’s going to be a massive investigation, they said. Pretty much all our assets are frozen, our entire hero operation has been put on hold. And you… don’t seem all that surprised by any of this.”

Melinda held his gaze for a long time, her face expressionless, the silence speaking volumes until she finally broke it. “No.”

“I wondered,” Coulson murmured. “When you reached out this afternoon, I wondered… I guess it all makes sense…”

“Coulson, SHIELD was broken,” Melinda said quietly. “It was rotting from the inside out. Had been for a long time. Somebody had to do something before things got out of hand.”

“Couldn’t have given me a heads’ up, could you?” he asked with a sad smile. He shook his head and turned his attention to the silver cases Melinda had moved onto the desk a few minutes ago. He popped the top one open and studied whatever was inside. “Last couple of things SciTech sent up before everything got shut down. I’ll probably have to hand this all over at some point.”

He lifted something out of the case – a sleek, hi-tech looking handgun. Melinda didn’t recognize it, but she could tell by the design that it probably wasn’t a normal gun.

“Dendrotoxin-powered tranquilizer,” Coulson explained, waving the gun a little carelessly. “ICER. Supposed to neutralize a target almost instantaneously without the noise, mess, or blunt force trauma of a bullet. They’re still getting the dosage right. Right now it just stops the target’s heart rather than knocking them out, which isn’t quite what they were going for…”

“I’m not here to look at SHIELD’s latest toy or check out your fancy new office,” Melinda said, a little more impatiently than she probably should have. “I’m here to ask for your help with something.”

“You, or the ATCU?”

“Both, I suppose, if you want to get technical,” Melinda frowned. “We’re not the bad guys here, Coulson. We want to give you an opportunity to work with us, help us cut the cancer out of SHIELD so that what’s left can remain in operation.”

“An opportunity or an order?” he asked. “Because I’ve already had my fill of orders from the ATCU, the UN, the DOJ…”

“It’s an opportunity,” Melinda said firmly. “Your choice. We’ll get what we need eventually either way, but this gives you a chance to get out ahead of it. For SHIELD to try and save face with the public once all this gets out.”

“And what is it, exactly, that you’re asking for?”

“Access.” Melinda leaned forward in her chair. “We’d like your help in getting into SHIELD’s database, their files. We’re looking for someone, someone who we think might be at the center of this whole mess. Someone we haven’t been able to find a trace of so far.”

“Can I ask who?”

“He calls himself the Clairvoyant,” Melinda told him. “That’s the only ID anyone’s given us on him. We know he’s got high-level clearance and a lot of influence here at SHIELD. He was pulling a lot of strings, putting a lot of pieces into motion. He gave orders to Pierce about how to handle the business side of SHIELD, puppeted Cybertek through Ian Quinn to develop weapons and tech and profit from the whole thing. Whitehall operated under his direction, recreating EnReD under the new banner of Terrigenesis. He even planted the entirety of Project Insight within SHIELD to recruit its agents into the program, getting them ready to morph into monsters on a moment’s notice.”

“Busy guy.” Coulson looked pale, almost sick. “And you have no idea who he is? No one you’ve taken in fits the bill?”

“No, not yet. We’re worried he might still be out there, planning his next move now that we’ve taken most of his pieces off the board. We want to comb through SHIELD’s files to see if there’s anything we might have missed, anything that can give us a lead on him.”

“There’s a lot of classified information stored at SHIELD,” Coulson said hesitantly. “Not that I don’t want to help – I do – but we’re all still reeling from this huge internal shockwave. Opening up our entire database to an outside agency at this point… you’re asking me for a lot, May.”

“I know, and I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important,” she said. “The Clairvoyant has done a lot of damage. A good hero put her life on the line to stop the Clairvoyant from doing any more. I’m just trying to make sure her sacrifice was worthwhile.”

A muscle jumped in Coulson’s jaw. “A hero?”

Melinda opened her mouth to respond, but found that her voice had gotten lost somewhere along the way, trapped deep in her chest and tangled up around her heart. She closed her mouth and just nodded instead, swallowing hard and blinking away the burning in her eyes.

“Quake,” Coulson said, realization dawning. “You’re working with Quake, aren’t you? Those files you asked me for, the flag on her searches yesterday… Well, I’ll be honest, that is definitely not something I saw coming.”

“You and me both,” Melinda said, a weak little laugh escaping her. “Neither one of us expected to work so well together, but once we started uncovering what was going on inside SHIELD…”

“She’s been digging around in the system,” Coulson nodded. “She got flagged by the security measures yesterday. But she hasn’t… I mean, she hasn’t found anything? She didn’t tell you anything about the Clairvoyant?”

Something tugged at the edges of Melinda’s consciousness. Coulson’s discomfort with their conversation seemed to be turning to something almost like agitation. She wasn’t quite sure what to make of it.

“She’s the one who discovered Project Insight and the embedded signal, and she helped me connect the Clairvoyant to Ian Quinn. We

went to go pick him up last night when everything went south."

"There was an incident at Cybertek last night, I saw…"

"Quinn called for help, and Hive showed up. One of your former agents, by the way. We took care of Quinn, and I killed Hive, but Quake… she's in bad shape. Hive attacked her with that mist he's got. She's hanging on, but barely."

"Talk about some twisted irony," Coulson said, shaking his head sympathetically. "Quake survives getting shot by Ian Quinn at Cybertek only to be killed by Hive there a year later."

Melinda froze. Her breath caught in her throat, and something dropped precipitously in the pit of her stomach, a cannonball of a horrible thought. *No. It couldn't be. Surely…surely not…*

"How did you know Quinn was the one who shot Quake?" she asked slowly, carefully, as delicately as one might approach a coiled cobra. "There was no record in her file of who pulled the trigger. She didn't even know for sure herself until last night when Quinn confirmed it was him that the Clairvoyant ordered to cross her off."

"Oh, well," Coulson waved a hand nonchalantly, but his face flushed slightly and Melinda immediately felt a rush of panic and frustration flood out of him. "I mean, it only makes sense, doesn't it? She was looking into Cybertek when she got shot and… and…"

Coulson trailed off, worked the muscles in his jaw for a moment. Then he let out a resigned little sigh from his nose and, to Melinda's disbelief, a smile slowly spread across his face.

"Well, shit," he said with a slight chuckle. "I guess there's no putting that cat back in the bag, now, is there?"

Before Melinda had a chance to so much as blink, Coulson hit a button on the desk and the unmistakable sound of the office door locking behind her filled her ears. She jumped to her feet, but was immediately met by the barrel of the ICER pointed directly at her chest.

"You really have quite a knack for throwing a wrench into my plans, don't you?" Coulson asked, his tone deadly. Coulson had always spoken in a voice with a meandering little patter – it had always worked to make him seem friendly and nonthreatening. But now that soft, friendly tenor had been replaced by hard, surgical steel – cold

and cutting and about as dangerous as Melinda had ever heard a man sound. “First by teaming up with Quake and spoiling the surprise of Project Insight, and now by getting me to slip up and blow my cover before I can put my backup plan in motion.”

“You’re the Clairvoyant.” Melinda felt numb. It was like her brain was moving in slow motion. This didn’t make sense. Coulson was *Coulson*. Necktie-wearing, bad-joke-cracking, nice-guy Coulson. There was no way he could be the ruthless, calculating Clairvoyant. And yet the gun pointed at her chest and the venom in his eyes suggested otherwise.

“It has a nice ring to it, don’t you think?” he asked. He gestured with the gun, indicating that Melinda should return to her seat. Not interested in being shot with something that would cause her heart to stop, Melinda obeyed.

“But… how? Why?” She shook her head like she was clearing water from her ears, still struggling to believe the new reality that faced her. “What happened to the man who believed in the greater good? The agent who was defined by his loyalty to SHIELD’s mission to protect people?”

“Don’t you see? That’s exactly what I’m doing,” Coulson said, spreading his arms wide. “Everything I’ve done as the Clairvoyant *has* been for the greater good. I’m just the only one who’s got what it takes to push the company line as far as it should be pushed, the only one willing to actually make the tough calls that need to be made so we can make the world a better place.”

“You’re insane…”

“I came to a realization, you see, right after you got the EnReD program shut down,” he continued, happily ignoring Melinda’s cutting remark. “I realized what a huge mistake SHIELD was making. They were throwing the baby out with the bathwater. EnReD wasn’t perfect, but we were turning our backs on true, world-changing possibility just because of a few setbacks and missteps.”

“I took the life of a child because of EnReD,” Melinda spat. “That’s more than just a misstep, that’s a catastrophic failure of judgement. SHIELD had every reason to be ashamed of itself after that.”

“No, see, that’s where you’re wrong,” Coulson shook his head. “SHIELD was *right*. They’ve always been right. EnReD was a worthwhile endeavor, they were just too cowardly to admit it because the optics were bad. But the greater potential, the greater good that

could be done when SHIELD allowed itself to make the unpopular move… Look, there's an acceptable number of losses on every mission. A scale of sacrifice that we weigh against all of our decisions. A cost we decide we're willing to pay in exchange for the greater good."

"But that's not a decision SHIELD gets to make for other people," Melinda argued. "Maybe SHIELD is willing to pay for progress with people's lives, but those same people deserve to be treated as more than lab rats or pawns you can sacrifice for some nebulous greater good you've declared. You don't get to be the arbiter of goodness and what it's worth."

"I disagree," Coulson tutted. "People have exceptionally bad judgement when it comes to knowing what's good for them. It's *our* job to know that *for* them, when their judgement is clouded by sentimentality or emotion or fear. People think SHIELD is here to protect them from bad guys, but really, we're here to protect them from themselves. From their own reluctance to make the hard calls, from their willingness to settle for mediocrity because it's more comfortable than the growing pains you get from progress."

"So you took it upon yourself to force your twisted version of goodness and progress into the world?"

"I took an oath," Coulson said. "To be the SHIELD. To defend the mission of SHIELD with every fiber of my being. So when I saw SHIELD itself shrinking away from its own values, I did what any truly loyal SHIELD agent would do. I began working behind the scenes, began whispering in the ears of people who could get things done for me. Planting ideas in Pierce's head about the profitability of playing both sides to ensure we'd have the funding we'd need, stoking the coals of Whitehall's ego about the injustice of cutting off scientific progress because of a few bad results. I used my Avengers-level clearance to set up Project Insight, giving me access to everything I needed, recruiting willing agents who understood the same thing I did, about what needed to be done to truly advance the world toward the ultimate greater good. And it all worked. People only saw me as someone who was blinded by my loyalty to SHIELD, a company man. But I wasn't blind, I had vision, insight that no one else did. I was Clairvoyant."

"I kept myself out of it all, of course," he continued with a smile. "A little failsafe. If things went according to plan, Project Insight would be activated and we'd have a whole agency full of super soldiers and

enough public goodwill for me to unmask and take necessary control of anything we wanted. If not, well, then those in Project Insight could take the fall and leave me a clear path to the director's chair, where I could still put my plans into action, once I'd reframed it as a necessary response to the internal threat we had almost not seen coming."

"But… you helped me. When I started looking into SHIELD, you gave me Quake's file. Why?"

"You were always a smart agent, I'm surprised you haven't figured that one out yourself," Coulson smirked. "It's an easy strategy. You were always a loose thread SHIELD had never quite tied up when it came to EnReD. You trusted me, reached out, told me you were looking into things. I knew you'd look whether I helped you or not, so the obvious play was to feed you just enough to satiate your curiosity and offer you assurances that things had changed, make you see me as a harmless friend. You were practically begging me to play you for a fool."

"Not such a fool," Melinda glowered. "I didn't stop with what you gave me. I kept digging. Daisy and I uncovered your entire twisted operation—"

"Yes, Quake's betrayal was an unforeseen complication, I'll admit," Coulson mused. "She's such a valuable asset, you know. Her DNA is remarkable, I was told. One of our most promising candidates. A bit of a handful, but nothing that some strong supervision from Insight operatives couldn't handle. And she responded so well to the G.H.325 – accelerated her healing so seamlessly that I don't think even she's realized she's different now. It really is a shame she had to die."

Melinda's vision went red, and before she had fully registered what she was doing, she was on her feet, hand wrapped around the nearest heavy object – a paperweight in the shape of Captain America's shield – ready to smash it into the side of Coulson's stupid head.

"That girl is more valuable than any agent in your whole damn organization, and it's not because of her DNA," she snarled. "It's because she's more of a hero than any of you will ever be, and if she doesn't make it, because of what you've done—"

"My god," Coulson chuckled, "I didn't realize you'd grown so fond of her. Here I was thinking you'd sworn off attachments years ago. But you really do care about her, don't you?"

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't bash your head in."

“Gladly,” Coulson replied coolly. He took a step around the desk, moved forward until there was hardly any space between them, and pressed the barrel of the ICER directly into Melinda’s chest. “Because one twitch of my finger and your heart stops beating right here and you’re dead on the floor.”

“I’m not afraid to die, not if I get to take you down with me—”

“Which is why,” he cut her off, using his free hand to extract the paperweight from her hand and letting it fall to the floor with a clunk, “I have an additional incentive you might find interesting. One that you’ll need to be alive for.”

“You have nothing I want.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that,” he smiled, his grin oily and oozing. He gave Melinda a little shove with the end of the gun, sending her back into her seat, before crossing back behind the desk and popping open the lid of another one of the silver SciTech cases. From inside, he extracted a small glass vial, filled with something blue. Melinda recognized it.

“That’s G.H.325.”

“Indeed,” Coulson nodded. “One of the few vials that hasn’t been seized by the ATCU yet. You promise to stay out of my way, to keep my name out of your mouth when you’re talking to your ATCU buddies, and it’s all yours. Then I don’t have any more interference from you, and you get the wonder drug that will give you your little friend back, good as new. The deal’s a no-brainer.”

“Like I would ever make a deal with you—”

“Oh, come on,” Coulson said, putting on a pretend pout, but failing to hide the delight that seeped out from him across the desk, “the other girl who crossed Hive, Quill, she made a miraculous recovery once we got some G.H.325 in her. And you know Quake can already handle the stuff. You wouldn’t want to be responsible for another young hero losing her life, would you? Just because you’re too stubborn and prideful to accept my help?”

Melinda hesitated, swallowed hard. Coulson’s words rang in her ears. Here was something, something real and inches from her fingertips, something that she could finally do to help Daisy, to repay her for her sacrifice, to stop history from repeating itself once again. Something she could do to save a hero’s life rather than end it.

“Once she’s back on her feet, you have my word, SHIELD won’t come after her for her betrayal,” Coulson said. Melinda couldn’t see his face – her eyes were locked onto the blue vial. “In fact, we’ll probably give her commendation. Spin it: *‘the hero within SHIELD who rooted out the inner evil.’* She’ll be honored, promoted. She’s been dreaming of becoming an Avenger. Maybe we can give that to her, you and I.”

“She gets the drug, and you walk free?” Melinda asked quietly. “I disappear, you take over the director’s chair and continue SHIELD’s mission with Quake as your new mascot? Am I getting that right?”

“That’s right,” nodded Coulson. “She lives, I fulfill my oath, and you can rest easy, knowing there’s no more blood on your hands. Everybody wins.”

“Everybody wins,” she repeated numbly. “Everybody… except for all the Enhanced people you’ll continue to prey on and experiment on. All the kids who won’t realize that their idols are lab rats and war profiteers. All the innocent civilians and good agents and in-the-way villains who will lose their lives as long as you drag out your manufactured good-versus-evil conflicts for the sake of your bottom line.”

She rose to her feet slowly, threateningly. Coulson swallowed hard, anxiety rippling away from him, and raised the ICER again, leveling it at her heart.

“Everybody wins except for all your acceptable losses,” she said, her voice low and dangerous. “You know what that number should be, Coulson? The acceptable losses? That number should be zero.”

In a flash, she pounced forward, diving across the desk and tackling Coulson to the ground. She made sure to get one hand on his wrist, twisting harshly so the gun flew from his grip as they both crashed onto the floor, papers and files flying everywhere. She pinned Coulson on his back, pressed her bad, aching knee into his collarbone and forced his hands out of the way.

Coulson spluttered, his face reddening as Melinda’s knee began to cut off his oxygen. With her superstrength, one flex of her muscles and he’d be a goner.

“You’re just going to kill me, then?” he wheezed, eyes bulging slightly as he struggled to breath. A fleck of spittle clung to the corner of his mouth. “Go on and get it over with. I’m sure everyone will love the story of the crazy villain who murdered the SHIELD director in cold

blood."

"I'm not going to kill you," Melinda said darkly. "I'd trade your life for hers in a heartbeat, but you don't deserve the easy out or quiet dignity of death. No, you're going to rot. You're going to sit in a tiny cell for the rest of your life and spend every day thinking about the people whose lives you sacrificed, and thinking about how even the oh-so-impressive Clairvoyant couldn't see the likes of me coming."

And with that, she gave him a swift backhanded strike across the face, a move so practiced and polished that she knew from muscle memory alone she'd used just the right amount of force to knock him out cold, but not to kill him. As much as she wanted him dead, she wouldn't kill him. There would be no more blood on her hands.

She got up from the floor, grimacing against the fresh pain in her knee and glaring down at the pathetic, unconscious body of the Clairvoyant, of her old friend Coulson. She'd been such a fool, for so long, about so many things. But now it was finished, all the pieces finally tipped off the board for good. Checkmate.

Melinda wasted no time in unlocking the office and getting the attention of some of the loitering ATCU agents who still patrolled SHIELD's halls. They'd taken Coulson into custody and listened carefully as Melinda explained everything Coulson had confessed to her.

"Copy that, ma'am," one agent nodded. "We'll radio this in to Director Price immediately."

"Should we arrange transport for you back to the medical facility?" the other agent asked.

Melinda paused for a moment before shaking her head. "No, thank you. I need a few more minutes."

The agents left then, dragging Coulson along with them, handcuffed and just conscious enough to walk between them, leaving Melinda alone in the director's office.

She bent down to retrieve the Captain America paperweight and the ICER from the floor, replacing both on the desk and trying hard not to stare at the blue vial that still sat there, teasing her, taunting her, tempting her. She picked it up, rolled it back and forth between her fingers. It had been so long since she'd been this close to the stuff, and

the vial felt oddly warm to the touch. She had forgotten it felt like that.

She didn't know what to do.

She knew what the stuff did. Knew what it could do. She also knew that Daisy had already been given it once before. She had tolerated it then, and didn't seem to have suffered any side effects once the drug had healed her from the gunshot. If anything, if Coulson was to be believed, it had given her minor healing abilities. So maybe this was her best chance at saving Daisy's life again.

Her fingers closed around the vial. Her hand shook slightly. She closed her eyes and began to slide the vial into her pocket, but something stopped her.

SHIELD had given Daisy an experimental treatment without her consent. They had all been lucky that it helped her and that she hadn't suffered any ill effects. Who was to say that they'd be lucky again? And did Melinda really want to make the same decision that SHIELD had? Did she want to rob Daisy of her agency like that?

She didn't want to lose Daisy, and she didn't want to be responsible for Daisy's death, if she didn't make it. But she didn't want to be responsible for a future Daisy never asked her for, either. If she was so determined to prove to herself that she was different – different from her past, different from SHIELD – then how could she make such a selfish choice?

How was she supposed to be better, to do good, when neither option seemed like a good one?

There was a noise at the door, and one of the agents returned.

"Ma'am? They said downstairs you might have… We were told there was a new course of treatment for Quake? Should I radio the medical facility?"

Melinda swallowed hard. She remembered the look on Daisy's face when she'd learned what SHIELD had done to her, to her Enhanced colleagues. The shock, the betrayal, the hurt. She remembered the way Daisy's pain from the CalciFi pills felt when she'd absorbed it into her body. She remembered Daisy's cheeky grin as she ate sour candy, the sparkle in her eye as they'd laughed about old TV shows and Halloween costumes. She remembered the way it had felt when Daisy had hugged her, when Melinda had told her she was a good fit, when

they'd finally realized neither one of them had to be alone anymore.

She remembered how strong Daisy was. How much power she harnessed in her body, in her DNA. She remembered how determined and sure Daisy felt in a fight. How she never hesitated to do the right thing, even if it meant putting herself in danger.

She knew what Daisy would want her to do.

"No," Melinda said, shaking her head. "No, don't radio. Tell the doctors to stick to their original plan. We'll just have to wait and see if she can make it. She's a fighter. I trust her to pull through."

And with that, she dropped the vial to the floor and crushed it under her boot once and for all.

Chapter End Notes

> Surprise! Did you guess who the Clairvoyant was? Melinda had some tough decisions to make here... hopefully Daisy will be all right :)
>
> Only one chapter left... I'm kind of sad to see this story drawing near to the end, but I'm hoping you all will enjoy how things get wrapped up! Until next time! <3

Chapter 14: An Unfinished Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Three months later, Melinda sat at her kitchen island, skimming through the newspaper as she sipped her morning tea.

'Former SHIELD Directors to Stand Trial—'

'UN Disbands World Security Council—'

'Cybertek Stock Prices Plummet—'

'SHIELD Ordered to Pay Billions in Damages in Landmark Settlement—'

'ATCU and Quake to be Honored—'

The headlines jumped out at her, one after another, each one bringing a small smile of sad satisfaction to her face.

True to her word, Rosalind had kept Melinda's involvement out of the press entirely, which Melinda was more than happy about. The further from the spotlight she could stay, and the further she could put the whole mess behind her, the better. She didn't want or need to be lauded as a hero for simply doing the right thing after all those years. She had balanced the scales; now it was up to the rest of the world to keep that balance in check.

The sound of a door banging shut behind her drew Melinda's attention, and she looked over her shoulder to see Daisy emerging from her bedroom, dressed in jeans, a t-shirt, and—

"Is that my old leather jacket?"

"You're the one who told me I had to wear a jacket to school this morning," Daisy teased as she grabbed her backpack off the floor and slung it over her shoulder. There was still a faint scar on her temple from where Hive had hit her with the Berserker staff months ago, really only visible when Daisy tucked her hair behind her ears, but she looked otherwise healthy and whole. She still had her bad days, days when old pain snuck up on her, or nights when old nightmares visited her mind, but she was getting through, getting better. They both were.

“You’re leaving? It’s early…”

“Yeah, I told Jemma I’d meet her before class so we can study a little bit more for our bio test.”

“Okay, well, have a good day,” Melinda smiled. “Take something with you to eat on the train. You’re still coming to the center after school, right?”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” Daisy said, returning her smile and grabbing an apple from the fruit bowl. “It’s your big day.”

The grand opening of the Andromeda Center for the Support of Enhanced Persons was that afternoon: a passion project for Melinda, pulled off with a little help (and a lot of funding) from Rosalind. It was Melinda’s way of using her abilities to do some good, of giving back goodness into the world and making it a safer place for people like her, like Daisy, like Katya.

“Bye, Melinda,” Daisy called as she headed for the door. “Love you.”

“Love you, too, Daisy. Be safe.”

“Hey, I’m a superhero,” Daisy grinned. “You don’t have to worry about me.”

“A retired superhero,” corrected Melinda with a laugh. “At least until you graduate.”

“Bad guys beware,” Daisy said, joining in Melinda’s laughter. “Quake’s coming after you with her diploma soon.”

“All right, get out of here, you little scamp.”

“Whatever you say, old fogey,” Daisy teased back. She paused before the open door, feelings of bashful happiness filling the room. “I know I already said it, but I like the way it sounds, so I’m gonna say it again. I love you.”

Melinda’s heart swelled the way it did every time she heard Daisy say those words. She stood and crossed over to give Daisy a hug before she left, sharp and strong.

“I like the way it sounds, too. I love you. I’ll see you this afternoon.”

And then Daisy was gone, vanished behind the sliding elevator door and off to face the day.

Melinda crossed over to the windows, watched until Daisy emerged on the street below and headed off in the direction of the train station, bold confidence and bouncing joy making her every step strong and full of life. Ready for adventure, ready to take on the world. Ready to be a teenager for once.

Melinda smiled. She didn't know what life had in store for them, exactly, but she knew that neither one of them had to face any of it alone anymore. She knew that life felt worth living again, and that goodness wasn't a fairytale or a PR line fed to the public. She knew they had a lot of work to do, to keep things that way, but she knew she wanted to try, and that Daisy would be by her side for all of it. And that felt good to her.

Chapter End Notes

> And that's a wrap on this one! I can't thank you all enough for coming on this journey with me and sharing cyberspace with me the past several weeks. It's truly been such a blessing to be able to start writing again and to have such an amazing, kind, and welcoming community to help me ease back in, so please know that I am forever grateful to each and every one of you.
>
> I originally intended for this to be a standalone story, and it may stay that way still, although I do have a couple new ideas to continue in this world, so we'll see if that takes me anywhere. Let me know if that's something you'd potentially be interested in, and I'll see what I can do!
>
> Officially up next on the docket for me is to hopefully start moving toward posting the sequel to one of my other stories, The Important Thing is to Try. I have about 30 chapters of that one finished and am hoping to be able to start posting again, maybe before the end of the month... we'll see! I have a few other, smaller projects I'm working on as well, so stay tuned for updates, I suppose :)
>
> I think that's enough from me for now. I hope you all enjoyed this one, and thank you all so so much again.
>
> <3 PocketMouse

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!